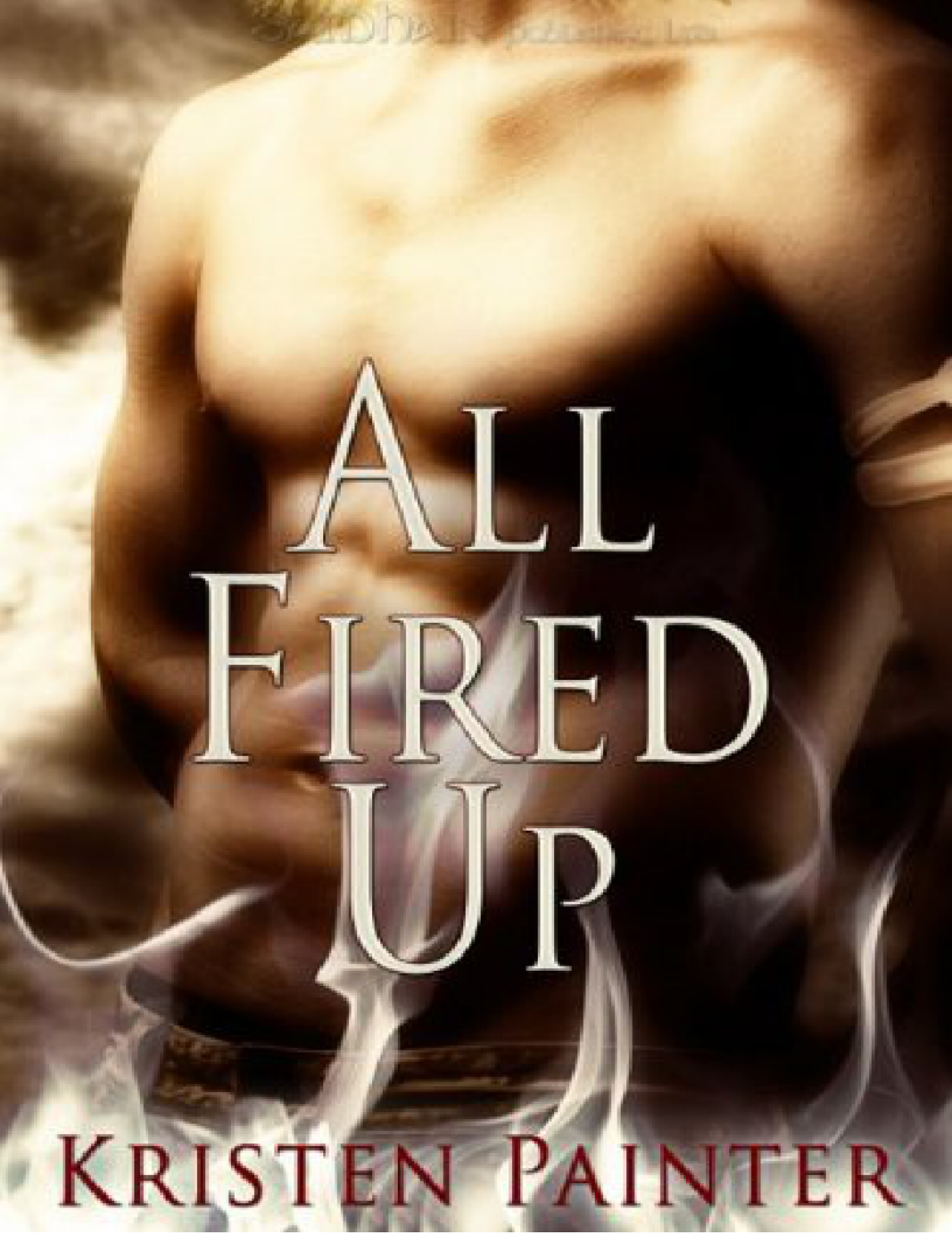
All Fired Up
Kristen Painter

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Annotation

Desire can heal the coldest heart—or burn it to ashes. Alrik Gunn knows from bitter experience that change isn't always for the better. From the woman who annihilated his Viking clan to the goddess who tricked him into centuries of slavery, betrayal has dogged his existence. The Goddess of Love is going to let him avenge his family, but for a price. As a Phoenix—a merchant of change—he must grant a human woman three chances to change her life. When former Irish dancer Calleigh McCarthy tosses a carved-bird statue that belonged to her ex into a roaring bonfire, she unwittingly summons an honest-to-god Phoenix. A sexy, irresistible Viking who offers her an unbelievable bonus—three get-out-of-her-crappy-life-free cards. She'll take it, even if it means guarding her cautious heart against the dark pain behind Alrik's eyes. Alrik has vowed never to let love sway him again, but Calleigh's innocence and kindness throw him off balance. Yet even as his need for revenge fades and his love for her grows, he is bound to let her make her choices without interfering. One wrongly chosen word, and any chance for happiness—for either of them—will go up in flames.

- All Fired Up
  - Prologue
  - Chapter One
  - Chapter Two
  - Chapter Three
  - Chapter Four
  - Chapter Five
  - Chapter Six
  - Chapter Seven
  - Chapter Eight
  - Chapter Nine
  - Chapter Ten
  - Chapter Eleven
  - Chapter Twelve
  - Chapter Thirteen
  - Chapter Fourteen
  - Chapter Fifteen
  - Chapter Sixteen
  - Chapter Seventeen
  - Chapter Eighteen
  - Chapter Nineteen
  - Chapter Twenty

- Chapter Twenty-one
- Chapter Twenty-two
- Chapter Twenty-three
- Epilogue
- About Kristen Painter

All Fired Up
by
Kristen Painter

To Jax, for all the brainstorming, conversation and friendship. Not to mention that little website called Romance Divas…

Prologue

Eire, 876 AD

Blood spattered the fair cheeks and wheat-colored braids of Chieftain Alrik Gunn's new bride, but Dagny remained the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

And the most deceitful.

If not for her clansmen restraining him, he would have slipped his hands around her pale throat and squeezed the last breath from her conniving, false-hearted body.

The acrid smoke billowing from the longhouses stung his eyes. His ears rang with the cries of his clansman as they fell to Dagny's men. But it was the sight of his mother and little sister huddled under sword point near the lifeless bodies of his da and brother that shredded his soul. Chieftain or not, there was only so much a man could take.

"Do not do this, Dagny." He addressed his bride with a steady voice, hiding his struggle to shut out the chaotic raid around him. He labored to hold the composure expected of a clan chieftain. She would not get the satisfaction of weakening him.

She trailed her icy fingers across his chest. "'Twas said the Gunn Chieftain was unbendable. Unbreakable. Unreachable."

She grabbed the neck of his kirtle and tore it down the middle to expose his torso. Her fingers skimmed his belly and went lower. The samite-trimmed sleeve of her wedding gown bunched against his stomach as she slid her hand beneath his wool braes.

Staring into his eyes while her frigid fingers wrapped around him, she squeezed hard. He inhaled at the pain, but held his tongue, unwilling to give her the pleasure of his discomfort. The touch he once craved now sickened him.

She smiled with blatant, false sweetness. "Well, Alrik the Iron, I found you easy to reach."

Her men laughed.

She fluttered her lashes. "Easy to bend to my desires."

Then her voice went as cold as her grip on his manhood. "The warm promise of my bed and you were mine to command."

The roof of one of the burning longhouses collapsed with a loud crash. The sound reverberated above the cries of his dying men.

She leaned closer. He turned his head away but not before catching a whiff of the garland in her hair. Her lips grazed his ear, her hot breath chafing his skin. "So easily led, like a lamb to the slaughter."

He growled low in his throat and strained against the hands

holding him. Dagny's men tightened their grips. "Spare my mother and sister, I—" The words stuck in his throat. "I beg you."

"The great Gunn Chieftain begs?" She laughed bitterly and withdrew her hand. "You waste your breath. Just as I am sure my father wasted his before your man slew him."

Alrik scowled. "You know that to be an accident. My man meant to slay the stag, not your father. And one life for one life is law." He glanced at the blood-soaked earth. "What you do is murder. I swear you will pay for this day, woman."

She shook her head. Wisps of blonde hair fluttered around her unsmiling face. "You are the only one who has yet to pay, dear husband."

He lunged forward again, but her men held fast, fingers digging into his skin. He spat at her feet. "Spawn of Loki."

Her mouth tightened to a harsh line. "Pin him," she commanded. "We shall see what it takes to break the unbreakable."

Two of the men raised their spears. In one quick motion, they rammed the blades through his shoulders, nailing him to the wall of the longhouse.

The pain snapped Alrik's head back and ground his teeth together. The sheer agony of being run through sucked the breath from his lungs, leaving him mercifully silent. Warm fluid trickled down his chest and back. The bitter smell of his own blood filled his nose.

She nodded to one of her men, and he handed her a broad ax carved with the runes of her father.

A chill harsher than the Nordic winter pierced Alrik's belly. He summoned the breath to speak. "If it is the last thing I do, I will avenge these deaths."

Dagny hefted the weapon to her shoulder. The blade, twice the breadth of a man's palm, glinted dull and oily in the watery light of the clouded day.

"The last thing you will do is die." Her knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip and raised the ax off her shoulder. "And dead men avenge nothing.

Chapter One

Calleigh McCarthy perused the wine bottles lining the shelves of the gourmet food store. With a soft sigh, she trailed her finger across the slick, curved surfaces. What kind of wine went best with a bonfire of your ex-fiancé's possessions?

Slimy, cheating crapweasel.

The pretty labels weren't much help. Red or white, red or white. What was that Billy Joel song? *Whatever mood you're in tonight?*

She smiled at the stocky clerk behind the counter. "What goes good with barbeque?"

He pushed his wire-rims up. "What kind of meat?"

"Pig." She paused. "And a little chicken."

"I'd go with that chardonnay to your left there."

"Thanks, white it is." Fitting, since that was the one color she wouldn't be wearing any time soon.

With a heavy whoosh, the drizzle outside turned into a downpour. She paid, stuck the bottle into her briefcase then fished out her compact umbrella. She popped it open and stepped out into the deluge.

A gust of wind flipped her umbrella inside out. *Crap.* She struggled to fix the tines while cold rain soaked her.

Umbrella righted, she pinched her briefcase beneath her arm and wiped water out of her eyes. What a day to test-drive her new suede boots. Stupid weatherman. Weren't there any men who told the truth?

As she headed for the subway, a bus screeched by, throwing a wall of cold, dirty slush. She choked on a bitter mouthful of the grey water, gasping as the icy blast soaked through her wool suit and into the delicate fabric of her silk blouse. What a fittingly sucky end to a freakingly sucky week.

Several stops later and desperate for a hot bath, she trudged up the stairs to the leaded glass door of her converted brownstone. At least tomorrow was Saturday. Staying in bed all day jumped to number one on her to-do list.

A sodden, brown box sat on her welcome mat. Probably the small eagle sculpture she'd won on eBay for Brad.

Two-faced, big-boob-loving lowlife.

Just more fuel for the fire now. She shook her head and scooped up the package. Water squished out of the cardboard and rain had turned the sender's address into an inky black splotch.

Tension drained from her shoulders as she went inside. A sigh of contentment slipped from her lips. It was good to be home. She wiped her feet on the mat before yanking off her ruined boots.

A fluffy ball of fur scampered toward her, tail big and bushy, whiskers twitching. Snickers dropped the rear end of a half-eaten rodent at her feet and sat, waiting to be praised.

"Eww! Snickers, that's gross. What makes you think Mama wants your leftovers?" She exhaled. "Maybe it's time to call the exterminator, huh? Of course that's not going to be cheap. What a day to quit my job."

Snickers leaned back, thrust his hind leg over his head with bizarre cat flexibility and licked the back of his knee.

"Your concern is greatly appreciated." She tossed her briefcase onto the sofa, sending water droplets flying everywhere, then crouched to scratch the Maine Coon's head. "I'm sure if you understood English, you'd care." Snickers arched against her hand. "Thanks for de-mousing the house."

She glanced down at the mouse butt on the mat. Gag. Pulling some damp tissues from her pocket, she pinched up the remains and tossed the rodent rump outside. Once in the kitchen, she plopped the soggy box on the counter and hit play on her answering machine.

"Hi, kitten—"

Delete. Next.

"Baby, it's me—"

Delete. Next.

"Sweetheart, please—"

Delete. When was Brad going to figure out over meant over? Two more messages.

"Hiya, Cal—"

Delete. Next.

"Hiya, girlfriend—"

Delete. Her ex-best friend, Jeana, didn't get it either. Too bad you couldn't un-relate someone or Jeana would lose her cousin status, too. Family wasn't supposed to screw family over that way, even if they were twice removed. Calleigh sighed. She never should have let Jeana set her up with Brad in the first place.

Brad and Jeana deserved each other. Cheater one and cheater two. They made a great couple. A great couple of cheaters.

Calleigh flipped the ringer switch off. She wanted no disruptions during the hot bath she was about to indulge in. She grabbed a diet Pepsi and headed for the bathroom.

After a long, well-deserved soak, she flipped the lever to drain the tub. The sucking sound of water swirling down the drain reiterated the theme of the day. Make that the week. Maybe even the last few years of her life.

She shook the bad memories away, wrapped up in her robe and went to the kitchen to uncork the chardonnay. She filled a glass with

the sunlight-colored liquid and grimaced at the first sip.

"Ick." White wine didn't taste so hot after diet Pepsi.

Calleigh turned on the CD player and took another swallow as her favorite song blared from the speakers. She belted the tune out, setting her glass on the coffee table so she could dance around the living room. Brad despised her singing. She despised Brad. Must be karma. She flopped onto the couch, giggling.

Laughter melted into crying. She didn't really despise Brad. It had only been a week since she'd dumped him, and in her heart of hearts, she loved him, wanted to be with him. She'd imagined their wedding day every day for the last six months since he'd proposed. She'd even named their kids.

He was a great catch. Too bad she'd caught him beneath her best friend.

Beautiful, blonde Jeana had no problem getting men. She had scores of them. So many, she made *Sex In The City*'s Samantha look like a nun. Why on earth did she have to have Brad too?

Calleigh punched one of the scatter pillows. To think she'd been about to give herself to that fool instead of waiting for their wedding night. She'd even bought a sexy little slip of black lace and lilac silk.

Hah! The chance of him seeing that nightie now was about as good as finding out what Victoria's Secret really was.

The answering machine kicked on. Calleigh jumped. She'd forgotten the ringer was off. Her annoyingly happy voice asked callers to leave their info at the beep. The caller obliged.

"Hi kitten, it's Brad. Are you there?"

She scowled at the phone. "Not for you. And don't call me kitten. Pet names are for pets."

"Please pick up. I need to talk to you. This is killing me. I'm a fool and I'm sorry. *So* sorry. Please talk to me. Please. It's no excuse, but Jeana's a hard girl to resist when she comes on strong. It was one time, I swear, and it won't happen again. Ever. I need you, baby. I love you."

Calleigh hissed at the phone, and Snickers flattened his ears against his head. She launched off the couch and grabbed the receiver.

"You bet your Gucci loafers it won't happen again because—"

The dial tone hummed in her ear. She slammed the phone down, then sloshed more wine into her glass. Figures, the first time she got the nerve to tell him off, he wasn't there.

Enough. She needed to relax, to forget, to unwind. She turned off the CD then lit the vanilla candle on the coffee table. Snickers tucked his tail over his nose and stared at her.

"Don't look at me like that. Just because I haven't started the fire for you yet doesn't make me a bad mother." The rain hadn't let up.

Wind whistled past the windows in a lonely whine.

She turned the fireplace key. With a soft whoosh and the subtle smell of sulfur, flames leapt around the fake logs. She shook her head. Those logs were more real than Brad's love. Leaning back on her heels, she scratched Snickers. He turned his belly toward the radiating warmth and closed his eyes.

Aside from the occasional mouse, the remodeled brownstone was a phenomenal place to live. Her childhood home was the one constant good thing in her life. She hated that sometimes the utilities only got paid thanks to her inheritance, but things had been tight since she closed the studio. Secretarial work sucked, but she couldn't teach dance anymore. The downstairs studio held too many memories.

Maybe a roommate was the answer. Four bedrooms was more than enough space for two people.

With an empty wine glass in need of refilling, she floated into the kitchen, a little lighter.

Tomorrow she'd buy a paper and start looking for a new job, maybe see if anyone needed a place to share. Enough thinking about her messy life. Time to focus on destroying the evidence with a good, cleansing trashcan bonfire. She tipped the wine bottle into her glass.

"Here's to my right to play with matches." She giggled softly and hoisted her glass a little higher. "Fire, the scorned woman's best friend." She drank to her own toast then started for the living room. The soggy box on the countertop caught her eye. Water seeped from one corner, puddling on the granite.

At least she hadn't spent much on the gift. In fact, no one else had even bid on the thing, probably due to the blurry pictures and lack of description. If Brad didn't like eagles so much, she wouldn't have bought it.

Maybe she could find an actual bird of prey to peck his hands off. Or peck off his pecker.

Laughing out loud, she set her glass down and ripped the box open, spilling foam peanuts all over the kitchen floor. Snickers began killing them with frantic enthusiasm.

The object, wrapped in newspaper, broke through the mushy bottom of the box and landed squarely on her big toe.

"Ouch!" Calleigh yelped and hopped around as she rubbed her foot. Snickers scrambled out of her way. "I must be cursed."

She grabbed the bottle of wine, her glass and the eBay goodie and hobbled back to the couch. After a good toe rub, she pulled off the newspaper. If she squinted, the carving could pass for a pterodactyl maybe. But an eagle? Not hardly.

"Only I could get duped into buying some prehistoric bird figurine instead of our nation's symbol. Look at this thing, Snickers.

Does this look like an eagle to you?" She held the bird out toward the cat before taking a better look herself.

Carved from a rich, dark wood smelling faintly of gingersnaps, the bird had a hooked beak and long, trailing feathers. Probably someone's failed arts-and-crafts project. Heavy for its size, the figurine felt more like metal than wood, and was warm to the touch.

Sighing, she set it on the coffee table and topped off her glass before checking her watch. Too early for the bonfire. Nosy Mrs. Crouper stayed up much later than an old woman should and rarely minded her own business.

"Go to bed, Mrs. Crouper," Calleigh whispered toward the wall that adjoined their brownstones. If she didn't want the entire Brooklyn fire department banging on her front door, she'd have to wait until the old biddy was definitely asleep.

Maybe there was a good chick flick on, something mindless she could lose herself in for a few hours.

She channel surfed, settling on an old Brat Pack movie. The crinkle of Rob Lowe's eyes reminded her of Brad's handsome, cheating face. Not good. Her thumb tapped the power button off. Maybe she should just call Brad and have it out.

Sitting up made her head swim. She emptied the wine bottle into her glass. Had she drunk that much already? Empty bottle in hand, she staggered into the kitchen to throw it away. Maybe it was the alcohol, but the phone was the only thing she could focus on.

She set the bottle down and picked up the receiver, staring at the little buttons. Did he have any idea how crushed she was? How much she hurt? How much she still loved his sorry cheating butt? She punched in the first few digits of his number, then hung up.

If her mother were still alive she would call. Her mother would tell Brad what a great girl he'd lost, what a blamed fool he was.

Calleigh rested her head against the wall. "If I don't take care of myself, no one else is going to." She picked up the phone and dialed every digit.

No answer. He had just called, and now he wasn't home? Calleigh slammed the phone down just as his voicemail picked up. She snatched the empty wine bottle off the counter and tossed it in the recycling bin.

The bottle clinked against the other glass containers, the hollow sound ringing in her ears. Anger wormed up Calleigh's spine.

Her parents should still be alive, her fiancé should have been faithful and her boss should be able to keep his hands to himself.

The bird carving taunted her from the coffee table, another reminder of the bad choices roosting in the chicken coop of her life. She stormed into the living room, plucked the carving off the table

and heaved it into the fireplace. Blue flames shot up as the bird crashed into the fake logs. She belly-flopped onto the couch, dry sobs racking her body.

Snickers jumped up next to her, and she buried her face in his soft coat. “You’re the most faithful male I know, Snickems. Why can’t I find a man more like you?”

She was starting to drift off when Snickers sneezed twice. Calleigh turned to wipe cat snot off her cheek. “What the…”

Thick smoke furled from the fireplace, traveling up the wall to the ceiling where it pooled in a menacing cloud.

“I don’t think I should’ve thrown that thing into the fire.” Hopping up, she searched for something to pull the carving out with. Gas fireplaces didn’t come with tools. Maybe kitchen tongs would work.

Snickers hissed. She spun around halfway into the kitchen. “Oh my…”

Pulsing softly, a pillar of crimson smoke stretched from ceiling to floor before the fireplace. She stepped back and swallowed. Her heart pounded in her chest. Mrs. Crouper would smell this for sure.

The column glowed like an aberrant jack o’lantern. Flames danced inside the pillar and then the smoke disappeared with a whoosh, leaving a shaft of flame in its place. She needed a fire extinguisher. Now.

A flash of light blinded her. Spots danced in front of her eyes. Calleigh squinted. The fire whirled around a shape within the column. Couldn’t be, could it? No. Impossible. Just a shadow.

She blinked to clear the spots. How could so much fire give off no heat? “I am never drinking again. Ever. I swear.”

Goose bumps rose on her skin. Her nerves screamed for her to move, but her body refused to cooperate. Fearful fascination immobilized her.

As gorgeous as Michelangelo’s David and as frightening as a nightmare, the most beautiful naked man Calleigh had ever seen stepped out of the fading flames. Wings of fire hovered behind his divine form, making him look like a creature born of heaven and hell.

She blinked again.

Chapter Two

"Who…how…what…" She licked her lips. The little sense she had left wasn't coming out right. *No more wine.* She closed her eyes and tried to stop her spinning head. *This is nothing to be afraid of. It's just some stress-induced hallucination, some trick my chardonnay-soaked brain is playing on me.*

She opened one eye. The wings were gone, but he was still there. Every utterly, completely, jaw-droppingly naked inch of him. *Wow.* A giddy smile curved her lips. Brad wouldn't like this one bit.

Her hallucination stretched like a man waking up. His serious glacier-blue eyes focused on her. Was his burnished bronze skin as smooth as it looked? Her fingers itched to touch him. She reached for the breakfast bar instead and steadied herself.

A hammered band of gleaming metal encircled one thick biceps. Scars criss-crossed his chest. A spicy, cinnamon scent wafted through the air.

He closed his eyes and rolled his head from shoulder to shoulder. Dark gold locks brushed the top of his collarbone.

As far as hallucinations went, this one was grade A, even with the scars. Actually, the imperfections were a little sexy.

Definitely a hallucination. Men like this didn't exist in real life. He looked like the cover guy off some steamy romance novel, like pure, raw sex. This is what she got for drinking a whole bottle of wine by herself. She cleared her throat.

At the sound, his eyes opened and roved over her body before settling on her face. He made eye contact, the slightest hint of a smile curving his luscious mouth, then looked around the room.

Her hallucination had just checked her out. She snickered. "So are you some sort of angel? Am I in trouble because I haven't been to Mass in two years?"

"Nay, fair one, not an angel. A Phoenix." Low and throaty, the liquid heat of his voice spilled over her skin. Sean Connery had nothing on this guy. She fanned herself.

He leaned back against the mantel like he owned the place.

Get it together, Cal. "You're a what?" She clenched her fist, digging her nails into her skin in an attempt to sober herself up. "I've lost my mind, haven't I? Are there men in white coats outside?"

"I am a Phoenix," he repeated. "And I am here because you summoned me." He bowed slightly then crossed his arms, his muscled shoulders rising like two delicious loaves of man-bread.

She counted his ab muscles. Was it possible to have an eight-pack? Her gaze went lower. *Oh my. If you're gonna dream, dream big.*

Realizing her mouth hung open, she snapped her head up and her jaw shut. Instant heat flushed her cheeks. Where were her manners? Hallucination or not, staring wasn't polite. Unfortunately.

"I need to sit." She moved to the couch and sank into the cushions. It was hard not to gawk, considering the sad fact that, at twenty-six, she could sum up the number of naked men she'd seen on one hand, unless you counted *National Geographic*.

"I don't know what a Phoenix is and I don't remember summoning you but…" She snuck a sideways glance and exhaled, long and slow. "This is the best dream I've ever had."

He pushed off the mantel and glanced at the fireplace, his nose wrinkling as he sniffed the air. "Smoke. You cast the talisman into the flames?"

"If you mean that bird thing then yeah. There's a bunch more of Brad's junk I plan to burn too."

He reached into the flames and withdrew the eagle carving, turning it over in his hands. His brows knit together. "So you did summon me, but not with the inscription."

Whoa. Naked and fireproof. "Summoned, conjured, what's the difference?" She waved her hand through the air. "At least you're not a pink elephant. Love the accent. What is that, Scotch? I mean, Scotchish?" She giggled at her intoxicated verbiage, leaned her elbow on the arm of the couch and rested her head on her hand. Maybe wine wasn't such a bad drink after all and maybe a little touching wouldn't hurt. He was just a hallucination, after all.

He frowned as though he were looking at a naughty child. "I am not a Scot."

"Okay, Not-A-Scot, do you have a name? Or do I get to give you one? I should be able to name you since I dreamed you up. How about Hunky McHunkerto—"

"I am called Alrik the Iron."

"The Iron?" Calleigh giggled again. "You do laundry? A naked man who irons. Wow. I should drink more often. Where have you been all my life?"

He smiled. A dazzling, light-up-the-room kind of smile. Toothpaste companies would love this guy. Heat pooled in her core. Heaven help her but she was getting turned on by a figment of her imagination.

"You were free to summon me as soon as you had the talisman." He set the carving on the mantel. "But I am here now, ready to do as you wish."

"Really? Well, then maybe you should put some clothes on, Mr. Iron. You might be a product of my imagination, but I'm not really used to the naked thing. I won't look." She yawned and put her hand

over her eyes but peeked between her fingers.

"My name is Alrik." He smirked and bent his head to catch her gaze. "Do you not like me this way?"

"Yesh." Her tongue wasn't working. She snapped her fingers shut to block her view. "I mean no. Well, yes, but it's not polite."

She moved her hand and glanced at him again, but there was no safe place to focus. He came closer, stopping at the end of the coffee table. She forced her gaze up from the now eye-level parts of him and stared into his icy blue eyes. So beautiful. He stood still, seemingly content to let her look.

Shifting her gaze only inches lower this time, she studied his chest. Ragged scars marred his tawny skin. The worst one ran directly over his heart. How did you survive a wound like that?

He smiled gently and knelt on the red Persian carpet that covered most of her living room floor. Close enough to touch.

She reached out and smoothed her fingers over the scar. The heat of the pebbled skin made her shiver. She pulled her hand back. He felt amazingly real. "You should really put some clothes on," she mumbled.

He shrugged, the muscles cording in his arms. "I have nothing to put on."

Of course he didn't. But that was her fault, wasn't it? "Okay, well you should probably poof out of here. I'm really sleepy and, I think, a little thrunk. I mean drunk. Or maybe I'm already asleep. Or a lot drunk." She rubbed her eyes and yawned.

"Poof?" His forehead wrinkled. "What does this mean?"

"Disappear." She waved her hand. "Make some more smoke and go away."

He nodded in understanding, but then shook his head, a new frown on his face. "Nay, you summoned me. I must stay until your three changes are granted."

"Three changes? I don't get it. Wait, don't answer that yet." She stood up. The room tilted. She made it to the wall and steadied herself before shuffling to the linen closet. She grabbed a blue plaid flannel sheet and headed back to the couch, trailing one hand along the chair rail for support.

"Here." She tossed the sheet in his direction. "Wrap that around yourself so I can look at you without needing to go to confession." She plopped back down on the couch, this time on the farthest side from him.

He caught the sheet as he stood up. He shook it out, stared at it, then folded the fabric in half and pleated it around his waist like a kilt. Not a bad look.

She yawned again. The wine was knocking her out. What had

they been talking about? Chances? Changes? Changes. That was it. "Okay, explain these three changes."

"I am a Phoenix. Those who summon me desire their life to be reborn. I offer you three chances to do that."

"I get three wishes?" She grinned. "You're a genie?" She peered behind him. "Where's your bottle?"

He scowled. "Nay, I am not a genie. The Jinn are deceitful tricksters. I am a Phoenix. We are honorable."

"We?" She looked behind him again. There was no one else in the room. "Um, okay. Isn't a phoenix some sort of bird that burns up every couple of hundred years, only to be reborn out of its own ashes?"

A grin lit his face. "Very good."

She shrugged. "I read Harry Potter."

"You read? That is impressive." He raised his eyebrows before continuing. "I do not know this Harry you speak of but you are right. The phoenix is a bird, but I am a Phoenix as well."

Did he just say he was a bird? "I'm definitely integrated. Intoxicated." She shook her head.

"So, Arlik—"

"*Alrik*," he corrected, a frustrated frown on his face.

"Alrik, phoenix guy, hallucination thingy, could you get out of my head now?" She sighed. "I mean, you're really cute but I've had a crappy week and I really need some sleep that doesn't involve dreams about men. Of any kind."

"I cannot leave until the three changes are granted." By the serious set of his jaw, she assumed he meant what he said. Pretty convincing for a hallucination.

"Hey, it's all good. You can go. Or shift me into a dream about chocolate being calorie-free. That would work, too. Whatever. I'm going to dream myself into bed now." Yawning, she got up, wobbling as the floor shifted beneath her. She grabbed the arm of the couch, straightened herself then tightened her robe.

He moved around the coffee table and came toward her. "Please, sit. I will explain. I am here to help."

She backed up. "I don't see how a drunken fantasy is going to change my life. Unless I start telling people about you…that would do it."

"I am real." He took another step.

She edged around the couch to put distance between herself and the impossibly sexy apparition coming toward her.

Her thigh connected with the sharp corner of the end table. "Ow!" A lamp crashed onto the sofa, and she pitched backward. Two strong arms and a warm lap cushioned her fall. She looked up into

blue eyes filled with concern.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"How did you…you were just over there." She pointed lamely in the direction of the coffee table. What was that scent? She sniffed him. "You smell like red-hots."

His warmth seeped through her chenille robe and she couldn't help but think again how real he felt. *Were hallucinations warm?*

He lifted her to her feet, one thick, muscled arm behind her back and one rough hand holding hers.

Her thigh throbbed where she'd run into the edge of the table. No doubt a nasty bruise in the making. She hiked up her robe to see if she'd broken the skin. A big red welt marked her flesh. "That's not going to be pretty."

A low throaty sigh filled her ears. She glanced at him. His gaze was anchored on her bare legs, his mouth slightly parted. She dropped her robe. He had to be a hallucination if the sight of her bare legs got that kind of response out of him. Real men reacted to her like she was tuna surprise, not filet mignon.

"Let me explain. This will be easier if you understand," he said.

Yawning again, she nodded. Her head swam with the need for sleep. Must be the dream was about to end. "'Kay. You're cute. Too bad you're not real."

He snatched her hand, and planted it on the thick scar across his chest. "Does my heart not beat? Am I not warm with the blood that runs through my veins? I am real, fair eyes. I am most definitely real."

The winsome lass kept her hand on his chest for only a moment before tugging it back. Her beautiful bronze eyes filled with confusion. Color spread across her cheeks. Maybe she had not summoned him on purpose after all. Well, it mattered not. He was here now.

"You can't be real." She tumbled down onto the couch, settled onto the cushions, and tucked her feet beneath her.

The sight of her long legs, pale as new silk, heated his blood. Dark red curls spilled over her shoulders and into her eyes. She brushed them back, succeeding only in loosening a few more. His hands yearned to tangle in those curls.

By Odin's good eye, she was a lovely creature, as curved and shapely as any woman he'd known. How long had it been since a woman's scent had perfumed his skin?

Dagny's image flickered in his mind.

Beautiful, deceitful betrayer.

A bitter taste filled his mouth. The scar over his heart burned. No woman would ever sway him that way again.

The lass stared at him, her sleepy bronze eyes focused on his

chest. He realized his hand rested on the fatal scar. He eased his hand away, but her gaze stayed fixed.

"Tha' musta hurt." Her words slurred, her lids fluttered downward.

"Aye." He had a feeling he was not going to explain much tonight. "What is your name, lass?"

"Calleigh," she mumbled. "Calleigh Siobhan McCarthy." Her head bobbed. "You're just a dream, aren't you?" she whispered.

"Aye. Go to sleep now." Perhaps it was best she thought that until he truly knew he was supposed to be here.

Her eyes closed, and her head tipped back against the cushions. Soft, sighing breaths slipped from her rose-colored lips.

He looked at the goblet on the table and grinned. How much wine had she drunk? More than she aught.

Calleigh Siobhan McCarthy. A daughter of Eire, yet she claimed not to have summoned him. Another of Freya's tricks perhaps? The goddess's strange and oft cruel sense of humor was well known among the Brotherhood. Either she or Eros would know if this woman was really meant to be his next charge.

Alrik scooped the slumbering lass into his arms. She smelled so sweet his mouth watered. Did all the women of this time smell like confections? She nuzzled against him. Her robe shifted, revealing the creamy swell of her breast. He looked away too late. His groin tightened. The goddess of love had a hand in this, that much he was sure. Foolish Freya, always amusing herself with the lives of mortals.

Once Calleigh was tucked into her bed, Alrik shut the door to her bedchamber. Time to confront Freya and see what game the goddess played.

He went back to the room he had first entered and stood before the fireplace. He spoke to the air, his lips quirked in a knowing smile. "How kind of you, Freya, to give me such a beautiful charge, perhaps even more beautiful than you—"

In a soundless flash of light, the room around him disappeared, replaced by the glorious halls of Valhalla.

"You would not dare speak such a thing, Viking. Not if you ever wish to fulfill your service to me." Freya reclined on a chaise in her throne room. Thick waves of rose-gold hair spilled over her alabaster shoulders. Jeweled brooches fastened the slip of pleated white silk she was almost not wearing. So sheer was the fabric of her gown, the blush of her nipples showed through. She was more Venus today than Freya. Despite her blatant display, he felt nothing. The goddess's charms came at too high a price.

Behind her, on a perch of gold and jasper, roosted the Phoenix bird. Feathers the color of a sunset adorned the hawk-sized creature.

He knew well the powerful magic in those feathers.

"Goddess, I did not mean to imply—"

"You most certainly did." She tipped her face up, the brilliant lazuline of her irises as startling as every other shade her changeable blue eyes were capable of. "You sought my company. Now you have it. Do not waste my time, Phoenix. I am busy."

Propped on pillows on the marble floor alongside Freya's chaise, a naked Eros scowled, obviously less than pleased at being seen in such a subservient position. He yanked a silk coverlet over his hips.

Alrik nodded to the demi-god and averted his eyes in what he hoped Eros would understand as respect. Under no circumstance did he wish to invoke the lesser god's wrath.

His chieftain blood revolted at her haughty tone, but he thought of the day he would have his vengeance on Dagny. The day when Freya would grant him his freedom and his own second chance. The promise of that day calmed him but not enough to unclench his jaw.

"Aye, goddess," he ground the words out, fists tamped against his thighs. "I would ask a question of you."

She leaned back on her chaise and trailed one delicate foot across Eros's tanned hip, dragging the coverlet off. He yanked the silk back, but Freya seemed not to notice. She dropped her hand to his head and lazily combed her fingers through the demi-god's blond curls. "So ask."

"My charge claims not to have summoned me, and I think she speaks the truth. Perhaps there has been some mistake?"

"Are you implying I make mistakes, Viking?" Her hand fisted in Eros's flaxen locks, causing him to grimace.

"Nay. Never. But it has been almost a century and a half since my talisman was stolen and I was summoned. I think it came to this new charge accidentally." As much as he wanted time away from the goddess, he did not want to burden a mortal unnecessarily.

She relaxed, again petting Eros. "So the talisman has shown up." She shrugged. "Your duty remains the same, no matter who summons you. Three changes must be granted before you may leave."

He nodded. He would do his job, as he always did, without question, without issue, always focused on the day he would be free. This time would be no different.

The goddess spread her fingers possessively over Eros's chest and gazed at the god of love like he was a sweet to be savored. Completely occupied, Freya waved her hand. "You are dismissed."

Alrik again stood in front of Calleigh's fireplace.

The goddess was doing this on purpose. He knew it with every bit of warrior's intuition in his bones. She would not forgive his rejecting her and most likely, would continue to make earning his freedom a

most difficult task. He clenched his hands. No one would stop him from getting his revenge.

Especially not a woman.

Chapter Three

Calleigh was sure Snickers had spent half the night jumping up and down on her head and the other half stuffing fur balls in her mouth.

She unstuck her tongue from the roof of her mouth and squinted at the clock. 10:53 a.m. A pretty good start to spending the whole day in bed. At least she'd managed to get into bed after drinking an entire bottle of wine on an empty stomach. She lifted the covers. Even if she was still wearing her robe.

What a dream. What a hunk. That body. Oh my. She wiggled her toes with the sheer pleasure of remembering. And all that smoke…so bizarre. And fun. Even dinner at Thai'd Up had never given her such erotic dreams, and their curry was hot enough to strip wallpaper.

She yawned, rubbed her eyes and sat up. Bad decision. Her stomach pitched and the throbbing in her head made her moan. The bathroom seemed very far away. At least Snickers wasn't on the bed to give her one of his famous disapproving looks.

Speaking of which, where was the furry little dictator? He should be yowling his head off from starvation by now. She got up slowly, making her way to the kitchen without flipping light switches. The candle on the coffee table was out but a fire still flickered in the fireplace. Last night's storm lingered, casting everything in a deep gloom. Perfect. Right now, dark was good.

Still no Snickers. Maybe he'd caught another mouse. She opened the fridge, scrunching her eyes at the light, and grabbed a diet Pepsi. Nothing else appealed, but she knew she should eat something.

If she'd learned anything at all from her nightlife-loving Uncle Seamus, it was that a good coating of grease was just the thing for a hangover. What she needed was a big cheese omelet, a side of crispy home fries, and some of the black sludge the diner two blocks down called coffee. She shut the fridge. After a long hot shower she'd head to Little Joe's.

Oh…a hot shower sounded fabulous. For being hungover and throbbing like a beating heart, her brain was working remarkably well. Better turn the fireplace off first. Her gas bill would be through the roof.

Setting her soda on the counter, she shuffled into the living room. She grabbed the key off the mantle, knelt and turned the fire off, swaying slightly.

"A-ha. I thought there was magic in that fire when the wood did not burn away."

The key fell from her hand and clunked onto the hardwood floor

as she pivoted. Her robe twisted underneath her and she plopped onto her backside, barely managing to keep her legs together. She swallowed, praying her stomach wouldn't embarrass her.

The fantasy man from her dream wasn't a dream. He was still here, sprawled on her sofa, the blue flannel sheet still draped around his waist. *National Geographics* littered the floor, and Snickers snoozed on his chest like a fat fluffy traitor. Her fantasy man was real and even hotter than she remembered.

She pointed, her finger shaking. "You…you shouldn't be here. You're a figment of my imagination. Why aren't you gone?"

"I tried to explain that to you last night before the wine bested you. And I told you, I will not leave until the three changes have been granted."

"You mentioned that." She rubbed her temples. "*Go* away."

He shook his head. "I am the Phoenix you summoned."

"I can't believe you're real. I thought you were a dream." She groaned softly. "My head hurts too much for this. I need a hot shower and something to eat. Don't move. I mean it. We'll discuss this later, okay? Because I have the sinking feeling that 'later' you're still going to be here."

He smiled. "Aye. I will be here."

"Don't smile at me. I'm not in the mood for that either."

"As you wish." His smile disappeared.

She stood and tugged her robe a little tighter. A wandering thought made her skin tingle. She narrowed her eyes. "How did I get into bed last night?"

"I carried you." His big hands massaged Snickers, who rolled over onto his back and kneaded air biscuits into space.

The sight of his hands on her cat and the knowledge that those hands had been on her made her shiver. "Quit doing that to my cat. He doesn't like men."

One dark brow arched up. "He likes me well enough. Perhaps he just does not like the men you have brought home thus far."

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but I am not discussing my love life with a…a naked stranger." Calleigh snatched the Pepsi off the counter and stomped down the hall to the bathroom, slamming the door to the detriment of her aching head. She locked the door. The nerve of that, that…man thing.

She cranked the shower knob toward hot then got the aspirin out of the medicine cabinet. Popping the top, she dumped three little white pills into her hand. She tossed them into her mouth and washed them down with the diet Pepsi. The fizzy liquid burned her throat.

Closing the toilet lid, she sat and waited for the water to heat. What would her mother do if a strange man suddenly appeared out of

a pillar of smoke and fire? Probably set out tea and cookies. Calleigh sighed. She'd always winked at her mother's beliefs in the "little people", Irish white witches and the Fae. Maybe her mother hadn't been so far off.

Steam poured over the top of the glass door. She hung her robe and stepped beneath the blissfully hot water. Tipping her face into the spray, she relaxed. No more thinking until after breakfast.

She emerged from the shower feeling a little better. A few minutes later, she padded back into the living room, dressed in a grey sweatshirt and faded Levi's, her damp curls pulled through a Yankees baseball cap.

Alrik still sprawled on the couch, one brawny arm propping his head up. Snickers hadn't moved either and now snored, upside down, feet in the air. Calleigh rolled her eyes as she tugged her sneakers on. Dumb cat.

She didn't really want to leave this guy alone in her apartment, but she was not taking a naked man to breakfast. "I'll be back in a little bit. Don't touch anything, don't answer the phone, don't answer the door, just stay right where you are. Understand?"

Alrik jumped up, dumping Snickers onto the couch. "I am going with you."

"Oh no, you're not."

"In this, you cannot stop me. A Phoenix must stay with his charge to protect them from those who might influence their decisions."

"No one knows about you and these three changes so no one is going to influence anything. And I don't have to stop you. The police see you walking around in nothing but a sheet and they'll do the stopping."

"Police?"

"You know, the law?"

"Aye, the law." He rubbed his chin and stared at her curiously. "What year is this?"

She frowned. "It's 2009, why?"

His brows shot up in surprise. "The war is over, then?"

"What war?"

"Between the northern and southern clans."

"You mean the Civil War? That's been over for a long time." She shook her head. Apparently they didn't get CNN in Phoenixland.

He ignored her response. "I am going with you."

"I think I covered that already. No shirt, no shoes, no service." She crossed her arms.

"You will give me clothes." The sheet slipped down around his hips, exposing lush curves of muscle.

Her mouth felt like the Sahara. "Hah! What makes you think I

have anything that will fit you?" She winced at the loudness of her own voice and pressed her palms to her temples. So much for the aspirin.

"Then I will go as I am, law or not." He folded his arms across his chest. The sheet finished its descent to the floor. He didn't seem to care that he was naked again.

Oh my. A new, more intimate part of her body started throbbing. She threw up her hands. "Fine! Wait here."

Mumbling under her breath, she went to her bedroom, returning a few minutes later with a bundle.

"Here." She tossed a football jersey in his direction without looking, even though she wanted to. "These were supposed to be part of the bonfire so I don't care if you stretch them out. These sweatpants are gonna be small but they're all I have." Eyes on the wall, she flung the pants in the same direction.

"*Sweat* pants?"

She glanced over her shoulder. He held the pants out with two fingers and sniffed at them.

She turned around, hands on her hips. "For Pete's sake, that's just what they're called. They're perfectly clean, just put them on already."

He laughed softly. She was staring again. And not at his face.

Her cheeks went supernova. She spun back toward the wall and tried to think about baseball and math. "Hurry up, I'm hungry and hung over and in no mood for your games."

"I am not playing games, Calleigh lass. You will know when I am playing games with you, trust me."

The tone of his voice implied things she didn't want to think about. Or maybe she did want to think about them. *Focus!* "Are you dressed yet?"

"Aye."

She pivoted to face him. Tight didn't accurately describe the sweatpants. The peel on a banana fit looser. He filled out the jersey like he wore the proper padding underneath. People were going to think he shopped in the kid's department.

A bead of sweat trickled down her spine. The temperature in her home seemed directly connected to the tightness of his clothes. She stared again but he had clothes on now, and there was no sin in staring at a clothed man. Not much sin, anyway.

"Um, okay, let's go." After grabbing her purse off the sofa table and her umbrella from the corner, she pulled the door open. The cool blast was a refreshing change from the hot, cinnamon-scented air in her apartment. She glanced over at him. "Can everybody see you or is this my own personal mental problem?"

His mouth quirked slightly. "I am visible to all."

“Great. Fabulous. Just what I was hoping for.” She rolled her eyes. “Try not to draw attention to yourself, okay? I grew up here. People know me.”

“Aye.” He stood on the landing, looking down the block.

Thanks to the steady drizzle, the street was empty. Calleigh opened the umbrella and handed it to him. She turned to lock the door and dropped her keys in the process. Bending to pick them up, she saw his bare toes.

Groaning, she locked the door and pointed at his feet. “Those are not going to work.”

He scrunched his brow and looked down. He flexed his toes. “My feet work very well.”

“Not barefoot, they don’t. You can’t go in the diner like that and besides, it’s rainy and cold.”

“Cold?” He held his hand out as if feeling the air. “This is not cold.”

“Well, it is to me. C’mon, we have to get you some shoes.”

They walked three blocks over to the Dollar Discount, where she bought him socks, a pair of sneakers, a sweatshirt and jeans. He came out of the restroom wearing his new clothes. Even in cheap duds he looked hot. She balled up the jersey and sweatpants and stuffed them in the store bag as they headed for the diner.

She calculated what she’d just spent. Lunch for a week. “You know, when I thought about getting a roommate, I imagined one with a job.”

“I have a job. I am a Phoenix.”

“So you’ve told me.” Why didn’t the cute ones come with brains?

Ahead of them, an elderly couple entered the diner. The man opened the door for the woman, letting her in ahead of him.

Alrik watched the couple, curiosity knitting his brows. “Why did the man do that?”

“Because a gentleman holds the door for a lady. Didn’t they do that in the other times you visited?” Or after that many years, she had him trained.

“I was not there to study the customs, just to grant the changes and be gone.” Alrik shifted the bag and umbrella to one hand and reached ahead of her to open the diner door.

She gave him a weak smile as she went by, denying the impulse to lean in and inhale his spicy scent. “So you’re a quick study. Whoopee for you.”

“Aye, whoopee for me.” He said it with such seriousness that she laughed in spite of her aching head.

They settled into a booth and a heavily made-up, bleached blonde in her late fifties handed them menus and filled two cups with hot,

liquid caffeine. Calleigh set the menu down, knowing exactly what she wanted, and picked up the steaming cup of black coffee.

Alrik watched her over the top of his menu.

She sipped. Hot but not too hot. “Ah, that’s the stuff.” Her next swallow emptied half the mug.

He set the menu down, picked up his cup and took a big mouthful. His eyes widened. He choked but managed to swallow. “You are trying to poison me,” he bellowed.

Several patrons glanced over. Two teenage girls eating pancakes giggled. The waitress stopped, carafe in hand. “Honey, if you think the coffee’s bad, you should try the meatloaf.”

Calleigh held her cup up for a refill. “Poison me some more. I’ve got nothing to live for anyway.”

The waitress eyed Alrik before topping Calleigh’s coffee off with a wink. “You sure about that, honey? ‘Cause if you’re dying, leave me a little something in your will.”

Calleigh offered a polite smile. *Lady, you have no idea.*

“So, you two ready to order?”

Frustration played across Alrik’s face, so Calleigh stalled. “Give us another minute, please.”

The waitress sauntered away, hips swaying, and Calleigh leaned forward. “Can you order or do you need help?”

“None of this makes sense.”

“You can’t read, can you?”

He scowled. “Aye, I can read. I was a chieftain, not a thrall.” His words came out in a huff. “I just do not understand. What is *corned beef hash*?”

“An afternoon of stomach trouble, if you order it here. Just stick to the basics, eggs, bacon, that kind of thing.”

A low, grumbling sound vibrated out of him.

“How about if I order for both of us? Nothing weird, I promise.”

“Aye, you have my permission.” He put the menu down.

She shook her finger at him. “Listen, buddy, I wasn’t asking your permission, I’m offering to help.” She slid some sugar packets toward him. “And try adding a few of these to your coffee. You’ll probably like it better that way.”

Calleigh waved to the waitress, then turned back to see Alrik drop the two paper packets in his cup. She fished them out with a spoon, set them on the saucer and tried not to laugh.

“You’re kind of dorky, you know that?” She sighed. Just her luck. Body by Soloflex, brains by Mattel.

“What is *dorkee*?” His mouth quirked around the word.

“Never mind.” She ripped open two dry packets and dumped the sugar into his mug, giving it a stir before pushing the cup toward him.

“Like this. Now, try it.”

He sipped the coffee and grimaced. “I still do not like it. I will have ale instead.”

“Not for breakfast you won’t.”

The waitress came back, pen and pad in hand. “What’ll it be, kids?”

“I’ll have the cheddar omelet, side of home fries and a large OJ,” Calleigh said.

“You want toast, bagel or bialy?”

“Bagel.”

“Egg, onion, everything, blueberry, or cinnamon raisin?”

“Cinnamon-raisin, toasted, buttered, schmeared.” Just the thought made Calleigh’s mouth water.

The woman smiled at Alrik. “And for you, honey?”

Calleigh answered for him. “He’ll have the same thing.”

“Coming up.” The waitress sheathed her pen in her hair helmet and headed for the counter.

Another sip of coffee and Calleigh started to feel human again. “Where are you from, exactly?”

“I am a Norseman.” His face glowed with pride.

“So you’re Norse? Doesn’t explain why you smell like cinnamon.” Did he taste like it, too?

“What?” He canted his head to the side.

“Never mind. So you’re Norwegian.” Who knew the Norse were such hotties?

He shrugged. “Your history names my people as Vikings.”

“You’re a Viking? Uh-huh. Sure, that makes sense. I’m having breakfast with a Viking. That’s perfectly normal.” No wonder he looked like he belonged on the cover of a romance novel. “Save the raping and pillaging until after we’re done eating, will you?”

His eyes narrowed, his expression deadly serious. “I was chieftain of my clan as was my da before me. I am a man of honor.”

“If you’re the chieftain, shouldn’t you be wearing one of those helmets with the horns?”

Another scowl crossed his face. “I have never in my life worn such a thing.”

By the way he clenched his fork, she decided to change the subject. “Forget the helmet. Explain this phoenix thing to me.”

“This meal house is not the right place for such a conversation.”

“Really? Top secret stuff, huh?” She fiddled with the paper napkin, twisting the edge into a little point.

“You are jesting with me, but I am serious.”

“All right, fine. We’ll talk about it later.” She sighed. “I take it you’ll be following me home?”

“Aye.” He nodded, suddenly pleased. “You are smarter than a horse.”

“If that’s supposed to be a compliment, you might want to rethink it.” Despite the odd remark, she liked that he was smiling again. His smile made her feel a little fluttery. Or maybe it was the hangover.

A few minutes later, the waitress returned with two white china plates, heavy with greasy goodness. Calleigh’s mouth watered at the slightly burnt, oniony aroma of the fried potatoes.

She dug into the home fries. Crunchy on the outside, soft on the inside and greasy all over, just the way she liked them.

Alrik pointed at his plate. “Tell me this name again?”

“That’s an omelet. Pretty basic, just eggs and cheese.”

He took a small bite, then filled his fork for a second helping. “This is very good.”

“Unless it’s overcooked, omelets are kind of hard to mess up.”

“And these?” He pointed again.

“Those are called home fries. Potatoes fried with onions.”

He tasted them. “I have had potatoes. These are also good.”

“Yeah, they are. They’re one of the reasons I come here, actually.”

Spearing one half of his cream cheese smeared bagel on the tines of his fork, he rested an elbow on the table and studied the bread. “What is this?”

She picked up her half with her fingers and planted her elbow on the table as well. “It’s called a bagel. This one has cinnamon and raisins in it. The white stuff is called cream cheese and you don’t eat it with a fork.”

Taking a bite to demonstrate, she watched as he mimicked her. Cream cheese all over his mouth, his eyes went wide. He chewed with relish and finally swallowed. “This is the best thing I have ever eaten. This spiced bread is delicious.”

The half was gone in three bites. He picked up the remaining half, about to devour it, then stopped. “You are not eating yours. I will eat it for you.”

“Just ‘cause I’m not eating it right now doesn’t mean I’m not going to. Eat your own. I’ll buy some to take home.”

“There is more of this round bread to be had?”

“Tons. And these aren’t even the really good ones. You should try the ones from Zabar’s.”

“We will go to this Zabar today and barter with him for more of these spiced breads.”

“Um, one—we aren’t going anywhere else today, two—Zabar’s is a store not a man, and three—they’re bagels, not spiced breads.”

“You are a difficult woman. Is that why you do not have a husband?”

She almost choked on the home fries. “I am not difficult. And I don’t need a husband. I almost had one, but that’s none of your business.”

“Perhaps that is why I am here.”

“What? Why?” She put her fork down.

“To find you a husband. A woman of your age should be married by now.”

Temper piqued, she stared at him. “Of my age? You are out of your ever-loving mind, you know that? To quote my mother, you are completely off your nut.”

“What does this mean?”

She glared at him. “I am no longer talking to you.”

“But you just spoke.”

“I meant after that.”

“And yet, you speak again.”

“Argh! Men!” Stabbing chunks of potato until her fork was full, she stuffed the food into her mouth and chewed. How dare he. He had no idea what had happened in her life. If Brad hadn’t worked at the law firm that had handled her parent’s estate, she wouldn’t even have met him. How was she supposed to have a social life when she had spent almost every waking moment keeping her sick mother company, paying her mother’s bills, taking care of her parent’s house, and trying to keep the dance studio going?

The sooner she got rid of this male chauvinist Viking, the better.

* * *

Alrik watched as Calleigh jammed the key into the lock, then shoved through the door to her home. She had yet to utter a word to him. Nothing like the women he had encountered in past centuries, this one had the spark of the Valkyrja in her. The thought sent sparks of a different kind skittering down his spine.

He put the rain shield in the corner, along with the sack of clothes, and followed her into the kitchen. She threw the brown paper pouch of spiced bread onto the counter. Bagels, he reminded himself.

She turned to leave and almost ran into him. He smiled, trying to think of ways to get her to speak. Glaring but still soundless, she swerved around him.

The cat sat by a bowl, meowing. “Your animal is hungry.”

Another lethal glare shot in his direction. She snatched something from a cabinet, tossed it at him then disappeared around the corner. He caught the squat tin and studied it. The picture of a cat on it did not resemble her cat. He frowned and set the tin on the counter.

He took a bagel from the sack and broke off a piece, bending down as he offered it to the little animal. “Here, cat. Here is something good.” He shifted. The trousers she had bought him bound his loins in a most uncomfortable way.

The cat sniffed the bread, licked it, then chomped down on the morsel and ran off.

“What did you just feed him?” Calleigh peered around the wall, a fire in her eyes that warmed his belly.

She was talking to him again. He stood up and smiled. “Spiced…I mean, bagel.”

“You can’t give Snickers cinnamon raisin bagels. What do you think he is, a little kid in a cat costume? What was wrong with the food I gave you?”

“What food?”

“This!” She grabbed the tin off the counter and jabbed it into the air so that the animal was in front of his face.

“That cat does not look like your cat.” Even he could see that. Did she think him simple?

A slip of a smile turned the corners of her mouth and then it was gone. She struggled to stay angry.

“It doesn’t have to be the same cat.” She rolled her eyes again, but her tone was softer.

“You are speaking to me. Does that mean you are no longer angry with me?” Odin’s spear, she was fair. Thor would have traded his hammer for a lass this comely. Such thick locks to trail across his skin, such delicate hands made to please.

His thoughts worsened the already wretched fit of the trousers she insisted he wear. Shifting again, he tried to adjust the fabric’s rough restraints without her noticing. Valhalla’s halls must be ringing with Freya’s laughter.

Calleigh’s anger disappeared like fruit loops at a toddler convention. “Yes, I’m done being mad at you. For now.”

Alrik smiled, but not in Brad’s I-told-you-it-would-be-better-my-way kind of smile. The Viking’s smile was a gentle thank you.

“I did not mean to feed your animal something wrong.” He pulled at his jeans, fidgeting with the waistband.

“I know you didn’t. And his name is Snickers, like the candy bar. Anyway, you didn’t hurt him. I just try not to give him people food. He’s spoiled enough as it is.”

“What is a candy bar?”

“Heaven in a wrapper. It’s chocolate and nuts and caramel. Very yummy.”

“You named your cat after a sweet?”

"I have a weakness for chocolate, what can I say?" She shrugged.

He nodded and started unbuttoning his jeans.

"What are you doing?"

"These trousers are binding me. They are not good. I will wear the blue fabric you gave me instead."

Based on the image blazing through her brain, she knew she must be blushing. "It's partially my fault. I forgot to buy you underwear. Washing the jeans would probably help, too."

"What does this under-wear do?"

Lovely. What's next? The birds and the bees? "Underwear goes on between your…skin and your clothes. It would help make your jeans more comfortable."

He plucked at his pants. "These are jeans?"

"Yes."

"I cannot wear these jeans any longer." He unzipped them.

"Stop!" She put her hands up and looked away. "You can't just strip down in the kitchen."

"Then which room may I strip down in?"

"That's not what I meant. You can't just take your clothes off and walk around naked."

One dark brow shot up. "Why not?"

Yeah, why not? Her hands went to her hips. Time to focus. She looked him in the eyes. "Because you're not two, that's why. Listen, I'll wash your stuff but you have to change in the bathroom and put the sweatpants back on, understand?"

He gave her an amused look.

"I know, I'm a difficult woman. Go change and then you can explain this phoenix thing, okay?"

When he returned bare-chested in the too-tight sweats, conversation was the last thing on Calleigh's mind. Mercy, the man infected her blood. Was it normal to salivate at the sight of bare skin? Her body usually reserved that reaction for something sugary. Although the idea of his skin and her mouth didn't seem like a bad combination. *Focus!*

She took the jeans and sweatshirt from him. They were still warm. "I'll stick these in the washer and then we'll talk."

"Aye." He moved to let her by, but she stepped in the same direction, bringing them chest to chest.

"I was…the washer…that way." She pointed toward the laundry closet. His spicy scent muddled her thoughts.

His large hands cupped the sides of her face, his fingers threading through her hair. She gasped at the unexpected touch. The warmth of his hands embroidered her skin with goose bumps.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, not really caring so long as

he kept touching her.

"I am looking at you, Calleigh lass." His cinnamon-scented breath heated her cheeks.

"Why?" The word came out as a sigh.

"You are not such a difficult woman, I think." He bent his head closer. His glacier blue eyes seemed to glow.

She might sink to the floor and float to the ceiling all at the same time. *Breathe, Cal, breathe. He's just a man like any other.*

Yeah, right.

Chapter Four

His thumbpads grazed her cheekbones, leaving trails of fire in their wake. The thoughts rushing through her brain—*he's going to kiss me-he's going to kiss me*—burned away in a flood of heat that took her breath and melted her senses.

Calleigh closed her eyes and waited for the first touch of his lips against hers. Would he taste like the cinnamon that scented his skin?

His hands left her face, and he exhaled. "So now we talk."

What? No kiss? She opened her eyes and looked away before mumbling her reply. "Oh. Yeah, okay."

Cool air nipped at the warm skin where his hands had just been but did nothing to cool the flush of embarrassment now rising in her cheeks. Disappointment wrapped her like a well-worn shawl. Difficult or not, she wasn't getting kissed. What had she done wrong? Had she totally misinterpreted that moment?

Fool. Standing there with her head tipped back and her eyes closed. It's no wonder she couldn't keep a man. How had she gotten one in the first place? Over-eager didn't rank as a big turn-on. The need to get away got her moving.

She brushed past him and yanked open the bi-fold laundry doors. A lint brush tumbled off the shelf and clattered against the metal lid of the washer. She threw it back up on the shelf and set the wash cycle. She stuffed his clothes in the tub, added some detergent and slammed the lid. Maybe she was jinxed. Maybe there was some sort of Irish curse hanging over her. Maybe she was just destined to be the oldest living virgin in Brooklyn. Or New York. Or possibly the entire United States.

With a groan of self-loathing, she plopped down onto the sofa. From beneath her lashes, she watched him settle into the leather club chair across from her. She started to tell him that was Snickers' usual spot then stopped. So what if he got cat hair all over his butt.

A lock of hair fell into his eyes. He swept the offending strand out of his face. "You know I am a Phoenix and that I have three changes to grant you."

"Yes." Her fingers curled. Was his hair as soft as it looked? Brad's was so short there wasn't much to run her fingers through. Not that he liked having his hair messed up anyway.

"These changes are entirely up to you. You may tell me what your first change is as soon as you are ready. After I make the change, you have three days to decide if you want to keep the change or discard it."

"So I really only get one change, I just have three chances to

make it right?" She rubbed her chin, considering all the screw-ups in her life she wanted to do over. Boy, that was a long list. On the other hand, she could ignore the mistakes and be happily married and have a house full of kids. The possibilities spun through her head.

"Nay." He tapped his fingers on the nail heads decorating the arms of the chair. "You may keep the first one and still make another. But you only have three and you must use them all."

"Okay, that's pretty easy to understand."

He opened his mouth to speak but shut it, apparently changing his mind.

"Let me guess, I'm smarter than a horse?" *But not smart enough to figure out you weren't trying to kiss me.* She raised her eyebrows and waited for an answer.

He smirked, and she guessed she'd at least partially read his mind. "I was not going to say that again."

She grinned despite the twinges of embarrassment still pricking her. He didn't seem to be dwelling on it so why should she? "It's okay. I think you meant it as a compliment."

He nodded, looking relieved. "I did. What else do you wish to know?"

What you taste like. She twisted sideways and wiggled her toes into the space between the cushions. *Stop it, Cal. He doesn't want to kiss you.* "I don't really understand the whole Phoenix thing. I mean, if you're a Viking, how are you also a Phoenix? How come I've never heard of Phoenixes except as mythical birds? Is there some head Phoenix you work for? Like some big Phoenix boss?"

Sitting back, he didn't respond immediately, but stared at the floor as if thinking.

"I'm sorry for all the questions," she said. "You must get sick of explaining this to every new person that comes across your talisman."

He looked up. "Nay. In truth, the charge who does not know what I am about is rare. But then most do not summon me by fire. I am just searching for the right words, fair eyes."

Fair eyes. She could get used to that. Maybe he didn't want to kiss her, but he must like her a little.

He leaned forward with his forearms on his knees and his hands clasped. "I work for the goddess, Freya. She is the goddess of love but she also controls men's destinies, to a certain point."

The goddess of love? This was getting good. "I thought Aphrodite was the goddess of love?" she asked.

"Aphrodite, Venus, Ishtar." He shrugged. "She is known by many names to many different people."

She untucked her feet from between the cushions. "But what does the goddess of love have to do with changing your life?"

“There are many types of love. Love of money, love of power, love of self. She controls all these things.”

“I take it you aren’t the only Phoenix. So why haven’t I heard about this before?”

He tilted his head to the side. “Have you heard of Cupid?”

“The fat little diapered cherub who flies around shooting people with arrows?” The mental image caused her to grin.

Alrik laughed, his eyes sparkling. “He cares little for that description, I promise you. And he looks nothing like that. Eros, as he prefers, was the first Phoenix ever transformed.”

“So you were transformed also?” She put her feet on the floor and scooted to the edge of the couch.

“Aye, from chieftain to Phoenix. But in my heart,” he thumped his chest, “I will always be chieftain.”

“Speaking of hearts, that’s the nastiest scar I’ve ever seen. How did you live through *that*?”

He glanced down at the jagged furrow across his upper chest. A muscle in his cheek twitched, and his mouth took on a wretched twist.

Calleigh tucked her feet back underneath her. Maybe she shouldn’t have asked.

When he looked back at her, his eyes were cold and his voice exact. “I did not.”

Calleigh straightened as a sudden frost settled over her. “But that means…”

He shoved to his feet and walked to the front windows, staring out into the rainy afternoon. “Aye. It means what you think.”

The frost turned into a deep freeze. She had almost kissed a dead man. She shuddered. Things had just gone from weird to mental institution.

“You’re dead?”

He didn’t answer.

“Are…are you a ghost?” she stuttered.

He spoke without looking at her. “You have felt that I am flesh and blood, have you not?”

“Aye,” she whispered, thinking again of the kiss that almost was. “I mean, yes, you feel…alive.”

He turned, a soft smile lighting his face. “Would you like to feel me again?”

The glimmer in his eyes warmed her considerably, but she was not about to be *almost* kissed again. *Change the subject.* “Why did you ask me what year it was?”

“Because I did not know. My last summoning was in the year 1862. My charge was a soldier in your country’s clan war. He was killed before his three changes were granted and the talisman was

stolen." He leaned back against the window frame.

"So where have you been since then?"

The smile faded, and he turned away again. "I have been in Valhalla since then." Bitterness laced his words.

The gruff tone of his voice surprised her. "I thought Valhalla was supposed to be paradise?"

"It is, for some. If that is what you seek." He splayed his fingers on the glass and stared out at the rainy day, but she could see his reflection in the window. Distant and detached. The soft patter of rain and the whirr of the washer filled the space between them.

What did he seek? She was about to ask that and a few other questions when the washer buzzed. She got up and put his clothes in the dryer, throwing in a few extra fabric softener sheets to get his clothes as soft as possible. Whether he liked it or not, he was about to smell like a tropical breeze.

She peeked around the corner. He still stood at the window. The reflection of light on his face through the rain-streaked glass looked like tears running down his cheeks. Maybe she should just leave him alone.

In search of something to occupy herself with, she went into the kitchen and rummaged around for something to make for dinner. Great. A handful of ramen noodles packages, two boxes of mac-n-cheese, a can of black olives and some peanut butter. Old Mother Hubbard probably had a better-stocked pantry. She opened her drawer of take-out menus and grabbed the one from Thai'd Up. Did Vikings eat curry?

She glanced in his direction. What was he thinking about? "Alrik?"

He shifted to meet her gaze. The hard line of his mouth was softer now, his brows not so tightly drawn together. "Aye?"

"Excuse me for not knowing my Viking history, but what year did you come from?"

"I was born in 848, in Dublin."

Puzzled, she put the menu down. "You were born in Ireland?"

"Aye. Does that surprise you?" His mouth softened further into an easy smile.

"Yes. I thought you were a Norseman. Or Viking, or whatever. How can you be Irish?"

"I am not Irish. I was only born there. My people came to conquer Eire as they had Northumbria and Brittany."

She was quiet for a moment. "You're almost twelve hundred years old?"

He nodded. "I was never quick with sums but that sounds correct."

“Holy crap,” she said, her voice a squeak. “You’re really freakin’ old.” She clapped her hand over her mouth and mumbled “sorry” through her fingers.

His face split in a wide grin and laughter erupted from his throat. “Aye. I am freakin’ old.”

Relieved at his good humor, she laughed too. “You sure don’t look your age. You don’t act it either. How old were you when you were…transformed?”

He opened his mouth to reply, and the answering machine kicked on. She startled. The stupid ringer was still turned off. She grabbed the receiver.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Baby, it’s me—“

“I don’t want to talk to you.” She slammed the receiver down.

Alrik squinted at the phone. “What does that machine do?”

“The phone lets you talk to people anywhere in the world, as long as they have a phone, too.”

“This is a very wise age.” He nodded toward the windows. “I have been watching these machines that move people. They are faster than horses and there is no dung to clean up.”

She smiled. “Those are cars. There’s also lots of bigger public transportation, like trains. Do you know what a train is?”

“Aye. But I have not ridden inside one.”

The answering machine turned on again, but this time, she didn’t pick up the phone.

“Baby, it’s Brad. Pick up, please. I know you’re there. I’m trying to do the right thing here. Look, just meet me for brunch at eleven tomorrow at Patois. We can work this out. Please, Calleigh. I’ll be there. I hope you are, too. I love you.”

When he hung up, Calleigh sank into one of the pub chairs around the breakfast bar. She sat there, staring at the flecks of black and gold in the granite. How perfect. He’d proposed to her at Patois. Was that supposed to soften her up? What if it did?

“Who is this man that upset you?”

She glanced up. Alrik stood beside her.

She sniffed in a deep shuddering inhale she recognized as the precursor to a good cry. *I will not be weak in front of this man. He’s a twelve-hundred-year-old Viking chieftain and I’m a modern, independent woman.* Tears would not impress him.

“He’s no one. I’m okay,” she lied.

“I am not blind. You are upset. Who is this man?”

“He’s my ex.”

“Your X? What is X?”

“He’s the guy I’m—*was* supposed to marry.”

“Ahh.” He sat down in the chair next to her and swiveled around to face her. An expanse of smooth golden skin filled her field of vision. The aroma of cinnamon enveloped her with a spicy familiarity.

He continued. “Actually, I do not understand. Does he not want to marry you any longer?”

“Yes, he still wants marry me. I guess.”

“But you do not want to wed him?”

“I did, but not anymore. I guess. I don’t know. He wants me to forgive and forget and I don’t know if I can.”

“Forgive what?” He propped an elbow on the bar, rested his jaw on his hand and stared into her eyes.

She stared back, studying his sparkling blues and the locks of tawny-gold grazing his strong jaw. Saints in heaven, he was the most delicious hunk of man. She didn’t want to think about Brad.

“Do you want to take a shower while your clothes are drying?”

His brow crinkled. “Explain.”

“A shower is like a bath, but standing up. The water comes down like rain.”

“Aye.” His smile blinded her like sun on fresh snow. “I will shower with you, Calleigh lass.”

“Not *with* me!” she sputtered. “I meant you, by yourself.”

He frowned. “Why should I do this alone?”

“To get clean? Or don’t Vikings bathe more than once a year?”

“My people were not animals.” He drew himself up, his face taut with hurt, and crossed his arms. “Do not assume you know what my life was like.”

She leaned back in her chair. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t have a clue what your life was like. My mouth has a tendency to get me into trouble. In case you haven’t noticed. Forgive me?”

“I accept your apology.” He uncrossed his arms and smiled. A hint of mischief sparkled in his eyes. “Perhaps your mouth could get you out of trouble also.”

Mind and body went numb as one. “What did you say?”

“You have gravely offended me, Calleigh lass, but I will forgive you for a kiss.”

A kiss? He wanted to kiss her after all? The thought of those firm, sensual lips pressed against hers turned the numbness into hot tingles.

“A…a kiss?” she stuttered.

“Aye, and all will be forgiven.”

Swallowing, she closed her eyes and waited. Every inch of her trembled with anticipation.

“Nay, lass, you must ask me.”

She opened her eyes. “What?”

He put his hands on the arms of her chair and closed the distance

between them, his voice deep and husky. “Ask me to kiss you.”

Heat flooded her face, her heart thumping. Ask a man for a kiss? That sentence structure was not in her vocabulary. Besides, she was technically still engaged. Sort of.

“Ask me, lass.” His mouth hovered beside her ear, his breath stroking her skin.

Breathe. “I don’t think I—”

The answering machine clicked on and she jumped. “Bless it! I still haven’t turned that stupid ringer back on.”

She slipped out of her chair and went around the counter to the phone, flipping the ringer switch.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded shaky, almost panting. She turned her back to Alrik so he wouldn’t see how nervous he’d made her.

“Hullo love, it’s Corrigan.”

“Hi, Uncle Corri.” What timing. She rolled her eyes, happy her uncle couldn’t see her.

“Are you all right? You sound odd.”

“No, everything’s fine.”

“Good. Just calling to remind you about Sunday. You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

“Forgotten? You think I would forget Uncle Seamus’s birthday?” *Crap*. She had totally forgotten.

“You and Brad are coming, then, right? Seamus will be disappointed if you don’t.”

“Of course, I’ll be there.” Without Brad, but trailed by a twelve-hundred-year-old Viking who’s sure to be even more fun.

“What have you been up to lately? Out and about with Jeana, I suppose. How is your cousin? Haven’t seen much of her lately.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure she’s been busy.” *Screwing other girls’ boyfriends.* “I haven’t been out much myself. Just staying in.” *Avoiding the public*. “Do you think Jeana’s going to be there?”

“She’s invited, but I doubt it. Since your ma passed, Jeana hasn’t been much interested in this side of the family, except for you.”

Probably because of Brad. Calleigh kept the anger out of her voice. “Okay, then see you there.”

“Sunday then, love.”

“Yep. I’m looking forward to it.” *Liar, liar, panties on fire.*

She hung up the phone. Time to have a long talk with the Viking about what was acceptable and what was not, at least in front of her family. She turned to face Alrik. He was gone.

* * *

“You press your boundaries, Phoenix.” Freya’s voice carried an edge as sharp as the massive gold sword resting across her lap. From the twin braids that hung on either side of her face to the highly polished gilt armor she wore, the goddess before him was pure Valkyrja. A sure sign she was angry. Eros was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he had a new charge or maybe he was helping another Phoenix. Alrik wanted to groan. Freya was hard enough to manage when Eros was around.

Sitting on a carved throne, she stroked the blade with a scrap of lamb’s wool, polishing it to a mirror sheen. “There is to be no interference. You know that.”

“Aye, but I was not interfering.” But he had been close, he knew that. Asking for the kiss pressed the boundaries.

Her hand stopped moving. She looked up, eyes of piercing indigo meeting his gaze. “Do not mock me, Viking.”

He bit his tongue to keep the torrent of words at bay. Nothing he wanted to say would help.

In a deliberate show of strength, she hefted the sword with one hand, spinning the hilt effortlessly to lay the unpolished side down across her lap. The slow stroking of the blade began anew. “If you want a woman, take your pick among the mortals of your charge’s time as the other Phoenixes do.”

“I do not want a woman.” He kept an edge in his voice and hoped she did not realize he truly meant her.

“So you have told me.” She kept her eyes on the blade. “But your actions say otherwise. Have you changed your mind, Viking?”

“Nay. I want no woman.” Save the bronze-eyed lass who held his talisman. She had been so close to asking for a kiss. He clenched his fists to quell the sudden upsurge of desire.

Freya stood and slid the sword into the sheath at her waist, keeping one hand wrapped around the amber-encrusted pommel. She came eye to eye with him. “Perhaps you are not as foolish as you look.”

Her finger traced the line of his jaw, her eyes now the warm blue of a summer sky. A playful smile turned up the corners of her lush mouth. “You are right not to want a mortal. There are greater pleasures to be had.”

He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep, calming breath. Her hand went lower, caressing his chest, but still he kept silent.

Her honeyed tone dripped over him like poison. “Behind each of Valhalla’s five hundred forty doors lies a different pleasure, and I hold the key to every one. Your every imagining would be fulfilled.”

“I want no woman until I gain my vengeance.”

She pulled away, cobalt flames dancing in her eyes. “You are a

single-minded fool. No wonder Dagny led you like a lamb to the slaughter."

He opened his mouth, a curse on his tongue, but he was already back in Calleigh's home. The new location did nothing to quell his anger. Freya had deliberately quoted Dagny to stir his blood.

"There you are." Calleigh smiled and pointed to the bundle waiting for him. "I wondered where you went. Your clothes were done, so I folded them up and put them on the couch for you."

Like a balm, her kindness soothed him. She had changed into a pale green knitted top that hugged her body, and her hair fell in soft waves around her beautiful face.

She came closer, concern in her eyes. "Are you okay? You look a little funny."

"Aye, Calleigh lass, I am fine." He wished he could hold her. The comfort of an innocent woman's embrace would soothe the vexation Freya had measured upon him.

"Are you hungry? It's almost seven. I thought we could go to this little Thai place around the corner since I don't have much in the house."

"I will go wherever you wish." Freya's touch still burned his skin, and he grimaced.

"Are you sure you're okay?" She put her hand on his forehead. "You don't look so good."

Inhaling sharply at her unexpected touch, he closed his eyes. The warmth of her hand spread through him, stilling his spirit, washing the goddess's vile caresses away. Her kindness awoke a hunger in him that had been dormant many years. The edge of it cut away the last of his foul mood. What power this woman wielded in her touch.

He opened his eyes and returned her smile. "I am very well. Very well, indeed."

She took her hand back. "So you want to go grab a bite to eat? Is Thai okay? Do you know what Thai is?"

"I will eat with you. I do not know this food you speak of, but it will be fine."

"Okay, cool. You want to get dressed and we'll go? I'll go in my bedroom. Just knock when you're done." With that, she disappeared down the hall.

He picked up the folded jeans and sweatshirt she had left for him and held them to his nose. They smelled sweet, just like she did, and the softness was greatly improved. After he finished dressing, he shouted toward her bedroom. "Calleigh lass, I am covered to your liking."

She stuck her head out. "What part of 'knock when you're done' sounded like 'yell at the top of your lungs'?"

“Thank you for making the jeans softer.”

“You’re welcome. So they feel better?”

“Aye, they are softer but they still bind my—”

She held her hands up. “Don’t! I don’t need to hear whatever you were about to say.”

“I was going to say thighs.” He grinned. What was she thinking about? Were her thoughts the same as his?

Grabbing her things from the table, she headed for the door. He reached it before she did and held it open.

Her brow furrowed. “I’m already buying, you don’t have to butter me up.”

“I am not putting butter on you. You told me a gentleman holds a door for a lady. I am being a gentleman.”

She paused, her hand on his forearm and her fragrance filling his nose. He wanted to pull her into his arms and bury his face in her curls. If only she would ask. Sometimes the constraints of not interfering aggravated him as much as Freya.

“Thank you.” She smiled. “That’s really very sweet of you. I’ll try not to be such a smart mouth.”

Before he could tell her what he thought of her mouth, she was outside, jangling her keys. “Gosh, it’s chilly. I should have bought you a jacket. We don’t have far to walk but I don’t want to stand out here all night.”

He shut the door, waited for her to lock it, then walked beside her. Her jeans followed the curve of her hips and the roundness of her backside so well, it took very little to imagine her out of them.

“Do those jeans not bind you? They look snug.”

She shot him an odd look. “When did you become the fashion police?”

“Is it not lawful to wear loose clothing?”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry you don’t like my jeans. I just bought them and I think they fit fine. And no, they don’t bind me.”

“I do like them. I also think they fit fine.” He thought about what she’d told him earlier. “Are you wearing underwear then?”

Her already rosy cheeks went a shade darker. “That is not a question you ask a lady!”

“So you are not wearing underwear?”

She stopped and looked around so he looked too. The street was empty.

“Alrik! Gentlemen don’t talk to ladies about their undergarments, unless they know each other *very* well.” She pronounced the word very as if she were speaking to a deaf man.

He crossed his arms and lifted his chin to hide his amusement. “But ladies may talk to gentlemen about theirs? I am confused.”

“Let’s just change the subject.”

She started walking again, so he did too but he was not ready to change the subject. “Underwear embarrasses you?”

“I’m not talking about that any more.” She did not look at him.

“Your sweater fits you very well also.”

“Okay!” She gave him a look that was half smile, half scowl. “New topic. Where did you go earlier?”

“I do not wish to speak of that.” There was no reason to share his humiliation at Freya’s hands.

“Tell me where you went and I’ll tell you if I’m wearing underwear or not.”

He grinned at her curiosity. Perhaps he could share a portion. “Freya wished to speak with me.”

“So she just beamed you up there? That’s kinda rude.”

“She is Freya.” He shrugged, unable to tell Calleigh how much he agreed with her judgment. Freya would never let that confession go unpunished and he had no desire to see the goddess again this evening. “If the goddess’s actions bother you, we may return to the conversation we were having when she interrupted us.”

She did not look at him but her cheeks colored. “Yes, I am wearing underwear.”

He laughed and watched her eyes crinkle as she laughed along with him. The sound of her joy was a heady thing. He wanted to make her laugh again, to see her smile more often. Her eyes glimmered gold and bronze and her mouth curved up like a drawn bow, taut and waiting. That was a smile that gave a man potent dreams.

“What are those called?” He pointed at the indentations in her cheeks.

“What?” Her fingers skimmed her cheeks. “Do I have something on my face?”

“Aye, but they are gone now. I only see them when you smile.”

“Oh.” She smiled again. “You mean my dimples.”

“Dimples.”

“I’d say I hate them, but I got them from my mom.”

“I like them.”

“Thanks.”

She stared at the ground as they walked, obviously embarrassed. Why did a woman this fair feel so uncomfortable with kind words?

She spoke with a gentle softness. “I take back what I said earlier. You’re not dorky.”

“What does this dorky mean again?”

“Oh, look. Here we are.” She waved her hands with a flourish and pointed toward a glass door. “Welcome to Thai’d Up, home of the best curry this side of Bangkok.”

His brows rose. He understood most of the words she had used but none seemed related to food. He opened the door for her again. “Sometimes, you make very little sense.”

She smirked. “Stick around, Viking. It’ll come to you.”

He let her order the meals again, and when the food came, she explained what the dishes held.

“This is pad thai. It’s noodles with a spicy sauce, some fried egg, bean sprouts, crushed peanuts and in this case, chicken and shrimp. One of my most favorite things to eat. Try it. If you don’t like it, I’ll order you something else.”

He wrapped the noodles around his fork the same way she did and took a bite. “This is good. I will eat it.”

“Good. I’m glad you like it. I love it.”

She smiled again, her dimples showing. Pleasing his other charges had been a chore. Pleasing Calleigh was its own reward. He would eat dirt if it made her happy.

“I’ve accepted the fact that you’re going to follow me around wherever I go, but we need to talk.” Her smile faded.

Had he upset her? “I am listening.”

“Tomorrow night is my Uncle Seamus’s birthday party and I have to go. If you plan on going with me, there are things we need to get straight beforehand.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for starters, my cousin Jeana. I’d prefer you stay away from her. I’m really upset with her, and I don’t need you drooling all over her like every other man in the—”

“I do not drool on women.” The very idea repulsed him. It would surely repulse the female.

“It’s a figure of speech. Just try to ignore her. For me. Okay?”

“Of course.” As though another woman could draw his attention from Calleigh. “Anything else you wish me to know?”

“Yes. My uncles are very…protective of me. Ever since my dad died, they’ve taken it upon themselves to fill that role. And they do. More than necessary. They’re gonna be all over you like white on rice.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’re going to question you to death.”

He narrowed his gaze. “I have fought death matches many times and come out the victor. I am not afraid to fight your uncles.”

“Whoa, let me rephrase that. They’re going to ask you many, many questions. Questions you can’t answer truthfully or they’ll think you’re crazy and try to have you committed. They’ll want to know what your intentions are, understand?”

“They will think because I am with you, I intend to bed you.” The

thought had certainly occurred to him. More than once. But he was powerless to act unless she asked.

"Well, that's one way of looking at it." A hint of color streaked her cheeks, pleasing him. Perhaps she had thought of it too.

She rubbed the tip of her nose. "We just need to figure out a story for you, okay? Like where you come from, what you do for a living, where we met, stuff like that."

He nodded. "I will say I was born in Dublin, and that I am a shipbuilder. I do not know about the meeting part."

She held up her hand. "Hold it right there. My uncles were born in Ireland. You say you're from Dublin and they're gonna figure out you're not from this century in about two beers." She pushed her food around with her fork.

"Just say you're from Norway. It's not really a lie, you are Norse, and it fits your accent. Sort of. I think the shipbuilder part is fine, although that might lead to union questions…" She sighed and took a sip of water. "We should probably not go there."

"As you wish." He would claim to be a midwife if she so desired.

"Were you really a shipbuilder?"

"Aye. Every Viking knows how to build ships."

"I guess that explains the body. Now, where are we going to say we met?" She tapped her fork on her plate.

Did that mean she liked his body? Suddenly, the whole table started shaking. He grabbed the sides and peered beneath it. Her jiggling foot knocked against one of the legs. He glanced back at her. "You are nervous?"

"Yes. This is stressing me out." She tucked a curl behind her ear. "Don't say anything about this phoenix business, either, okay?"

He nodded and let go of the table. It started shaking again. He picked up his fork and aimed for his plate. "Do not worry, Calleigh lass. I was chieftain of a very large clan. I know how to handle men."

She stabbed a piece of chicken and lifted the bite to her mouth. Done chewing, she raised her brows, her lips pursed. "You haven't met my uncles. They could make Genghis Khan cry."

Setting his fork down, he leaned forward with great seriousness. "I have met Temüjin, this man you call Genghis Khan. I have never known him to cry."

Calleigh rolled her eyes. "Like I said, you haven't met my uncles."

Chapter Five

Calleigh fumbled with the catch on her jewelry box. Meeting Brad was probably not the best decision she'd ever made but she had to give the ring back. Maybe then her heart could finally let go. And maybe then he'd stop calling.

She took the little black case from its pale blue outer box and opened it, stealing one last look at the engagement ring. The two-carat solitaire twinkled in the pale morning light, but the magic was gone. Only tarnished promises remained in the platinum circle. It was just a ring. A very expensive ring. And the last thing that bound her to Brad.

Her hand trembled. She snapped the box shut and tucked it in her purse. *Breathe. You can do this.*

In her search through the closet for the right outfit, white plastic crinkled under her fingers. The garment bag covering her wedding dress. She started to unzip the bag just to run her hands over the Italian matte satin, then stopped. What was the point? The dress would never be worn and now it hung in her closet like a ghost, haunting her with the constant reminder of what would never be. Maybe it was time to become an eBay seller instead of just a buyer.

Pushing the dress further back, she grabbed a jean skirt and a black turtleneck. Brad hated denim skirts. "Cowgirl clothes" he called them. She smiled as she stepped into the mini and zipped it up.

Sounds of Alrik thrashing about in the shower made her wince at the potential mess. Had he remembered to pull the curtain? After a very brief meeting with Brad, during which the Viking would wait in the car, she would take him to the mall and buy him something decent to wear to her uncle's birthday party. And, she reminded herself, get a present for Seamus. Not an easy task for a man who had everything.

Brad had been that way, too, but that's where his similarities to Seamus ended.

As she applied an extra coat of mascara, her hand started shaking again. Deep breathing didn't help. The thought of confronting Brad wound her stomach in knots. Confrontation had always been difficult for her, even more so with a man she still had feelings for. No denying it. This wasn't going to be easy.

Smoothing the hem of her black turtleneck over the waistband of her skirt, she checked her image in the mirror and sighed. Not teaching dance was bad for the figure. She sucked in her stomach. Better, but she couldn't walk around all day like that. Some women lost weight when they were stressed out. How unnatural. Why couldn't they binge on ice cream like the rest of the female population?

She picked a few stray cat hairs off her black tights as Snickers watched.

"Don't give me that look. Coming in here after breakfast doesn't make up for sleeping out there with him two nights in a row, you little traitor."

Snickers rolled over onto his back and stretched, exposing his spotted tummy. She tugged on black riding boots and shook her head at the silly feline. "That's very cute, but you're still a traitor."

"Who do you speak to?" Alrik stood in the doorway, a towel tucked around his lean hips. His hair hung in damp ropes. Beads of water glistened along his broad collarbone and steam rose in wisps off his bronzed skin. A single droplet rolled down the plane of his chest and over his nicely defined abs before following a fine line of tawny hairs down beneath the towel.

Oh. My. She swallowed. Twice. He looked like a big, juicy serving of man fruit. That had to be diet food, didn't it?

"What?" She couldn't remember what she'd just been doing.

"Who is a traitor?"

"Huh? Oh. Snickers. I called him a traitor for sleeping with you instead of me, like I should be. I mean, like *he* should be!" She mentally slapped herself on the forehead. *Get it together!* She followed his gaze and realized he was staring at her legs again, even though they were encased in black tights. Maybe he hadn't noticed her slip of the tongue.

"You look very nice." His eyes never moved as he spoke.

"Thank you. You look very wet." *Don't go there, Cal.* "I should show you how to use the hair dryer." If Alrik thought she looked nice, maybe Brad would, too. She wanted that cheater to eat his heart out when she threw his ring at him. Or beg her to come back. Maybe even cry a little. Yeah, crying would be good.

"Let's go back to the bathroom and I'll show you the wonders of modern technology." She headed for the door but Alrik didn't move, forcing her to squeeze past. The heat he put off amazed her. A few drops of water from his chest soaked into the shoulder of her turtleneck. An interesting thought about drying off the rest of him popped into her head.

She glanced back. He was right behind her so she kept going.

The bathroom wasn't as big a disaster as she'd anticipated. Nice to know the man wasn't a slob. She picked up the hair dryer and turned to face him.

"Okay, this is a hair dryer. It's pretty simple to use. Just turn it on and hot air comes out. Point it at your hair to make it dry faster. It's already plugged in so just push this switch up and you're in business."

She turned the dryer on and aimed it at his head.

Alrik ducked.

She turned the dryer off. “It’s not going to hurt you, I promise.”

“Can it also be used as a weapon?”

“No.” She struggled not to grin. “At least not that I’m aware of. Although you shouldn’t mix electricity and water. Never mind that, I’ll show you how to use it.” She pulled out the small stool tucked beneath the vanity and motioned for him to sit.

It squeaked as it took his weight, but held. He kept his eyes on the dryer. The towel split when he sat, revealing a thick, muscular thigh and reminding her of just how naked he was underneath that towel.

Concentrate. “Face forward, please.” The top of his head reached her chest.

He stared into the mirror, still watching her every move.

“I use this thing every day, you know. It hasn’t killed me yet,” she promised.

His shoulders dropped slightly.

She leaned over him and dug in a drawer for a wide-tooth comb that wouldn’t tug his hair too much. The heat of his shoulder burned straight through her turtleneck to her stomach. Comb in hand, she backed up for better access to his hair. She stopped at the sight of his back. The two wicked scars above his collarbone had a matching set on the other side.

He’d been pierced through. The thought made her a little sick and she swallowed the sudden nausea. The pain must have been unimaginable.

She looked up. He still watched her. Something dark shimmered in his eyes. He knew she’d been looking at his scars. No words existed for what she felt. More than anger. More than pain. Helpless to say anything useful, she put her hand on his shoulder. So deliciously warm. “I’m going to turn the dryer on again, okay?”

He nodded. “I will not move this time.”

“I’ll be gentle.” She flipped the dryer on and slid the comb through his damp locks, carefully directing the stream of hot air.

After a few moments, she abandoned the comb and used her fingers. She’d never known a man with such thick, silky hair. Most women would kill for hair like this. The soft gold strands fell through her fingers as the air dried them. She reached for more, starting at the base of his neck and winding her hand upwards. She massaged his scalp, kneading the balls of her fingers over his head.

She glanced into the mirror. His eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted. She smiled. Having her hair blown dry had the same effect on her. Except Alrik still looked edible. She probably just looked goofy.

Reluctant to finish, she spent a few minutes more than she needed

to. He probably wasn't enjoying her touch as much as she was enjoying touching him. Sweat trickled down her back. The room had become an inferno. She turned the dryer off. "All done."

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes slowly.

She grinned at his heavy-lidded expression. "I told you I'd be gentle."

A lazy smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "You did not tell me that would be so pleasurable." He stood, pushed the stool back under the vanity and stretched, filling the small, hot space with a sudden expanse of skin.

"Yeah, it has that effect on me too." The towel slipped down his hips a fraction. Calleigh backed up, tried not to stare and failed. "I should finish getting ready so we can get something accomplished today."

His smile widened. "I agree."

She had the distinct feeling he wasn't talking about their trip to the mall.

Still flush with the intoxicating pleasure of Calleigh's hands in his hair, Alrik followed his charge out to her vehicle. At the moment, with the way he felt, he would have followed her anywhere. Especially in that short skirt. His fingers itched to touch the black fabric covering her legs. Was it soft? Silky?

She paused in front of the vehicle. "Don't freak out in the car, okay? It goes fast but it's perfectly safe. Especially this one." She motioned with a slight jerk of her head before pushing a button on a small box attached to her keys. The sleek black car responded with two quick beeps and a sharp snick.

"What did you do?" He eyed the vehicle, wondering why it made those sounds.

"I unlocked it." She dangled the keys. "Remote control. Cool, huh? My dad bought this car for my mom so it's loaded. Heated seats, navigation, satellite radio, all that stuff."

He nodded, not sure what she was talking about. His gaze snagged on the words on the back of the car. Volvo S60 R. He did not know what the S60 R meant but Volvo he understood. Was that supposed to be humorous? His sense of relaxation ebbed.

She went around to the right side and opened the door. "Go ahead, get in."

He put one foot inside. "Is this vehicle truly safe?"

"Cars don't kill people, people kill people." Mirth sparkled in her bronze eyes.

If she jested, he failed to see the humor in her words. He lifted his foot back out. "Perhaps we should walk."

Rolling her eyes, she smiled. “Bad joke. Sorry. It’s safe, I promise.”

Still wary, he sat. The softness of the tan leather on the seats impressed him. What did a vehicle like this cost? She climbed in behind the wheel that protruded out on the other side. After shutting her door, she fastened a strap across her body.

She pointed towards his side. “Shut your door and I’ll help you with your seatbelt.”

He pulled the door shut but the idea of being strapped into this contraption made him want to get out again. The word Volvo was written again on the wheel in front of her. He pointed to it, hoping she could help him understand. “What is the meaning of this?”

“That’s the kind of car it is. It’s a Volvo. Like I said, very safe.” She nodded as if she believed what she told him.

He leaned back. “If it is safe, why is it named ‘I roll’?”

“I roll?” She wrinkled her forehead.

“Here.” He drew his finger beneath the word Volvo. “In Latin this means ‘I roll’.”

“You read Latin?” Her lovely arched brows shot up.

“Aye and I do not wish to *roll* in this or any other vehicle.”

“We aren’t going to roll, except on the wheels, the way we’re meant to.” She looked back at the emblem. “Are you sure that says ‘I roll’? I always thought Volvo meant safe or something like that in Swedish.”

He crossed his arms. “Do you read Latin?”

She rolled her eyes heavenward and bobbed her head. “Do I look like I read Latin?”

“Then you cannot argue with me.”

She stuck her tongue out. Heat flashed along his spine at the gesture. He wanted to suck that tongue into his mouth but dug his fingers into his thighs.

Oblivious to her effect on him, she kept talking. “Okay, fine, it means ‘I roll’. I promise you have nothing to worry about. Unless you don’t put that seatbelt on.”

He shook his head. “I will not be harnessed.”

“Sorry. It’s the law.”

“The law cannot see me in this vehicle.”

“They can if they pull us over. Do you want to pay that fine?”

“Nay.” He sighed, displeased to be reminded of his lack of coin. “How does this work?”

She unbuckled her belt, then reached across his lap and grabbed his. Her hand brushed across his stomach, leaving a small trail of fire in its wake. He inhaled as the craving for her ignited inside him. After the gentle seduction of her fingers in his hair, he wanted more. Never

had a charge made him feel this way but never had a charge treated him so kindly. So humanely.

The belt clicked into place and she sat back, unaware of the war he fought to control his body.

"Ready?" she asked, snapping her seatbelt back into place.

"Aye." *For more of you.*

He had only just let go of the dashboard when she parked the vehicle and turned off the engine.

She grabbed her purse. "I'm just going to run in and get a coffee and I'll be right back out. Do you want one?"

Grimacing, he shook his head. "I do not like that drink, but I will come with you."

"I'll just be a minute. Why don't you stay here and listen to the radio?" She turned the key and punched the power button. A soft wailing filled the car.

He frowned. "What is that noise?"

"Jazz." She turned a knob and the volume decreased. "I take it you're not a fan."

"I will come with you." He reached for the door but she stayed his arm with her hand.

"Look, I need to talk to a friend. Alone. Please, stay here."

He sighed and leaned back, a resigned look on his face. "As you wish."

Calleigh gave herself a pep talk the entire way into Patois but a nervous tingle still rippled across her skin when she entered. Coffee was the last thing she needed. She glanced at her watch. Almost ten after eleven. Good. Knowing Brad, he'd been there since ten 'til.

She spotted him sitting alone at a table for two near the old brick fireplace, drinking a mimosa. A huge bunch of blood-red roses rested on the place setting opposite him. The unhappy scowl on his face did little to detract from his dark good looks. She doubted his disposition would get any better when she gave him the ring back.

The scowl upended to a smile when he saw her approaching. He stood, picking up the roses. "I'm so glad you came. I wasn't sure you would. These are for you. You look great."

She ignored the flowers but felt a rush of satisfaction at his compliment. Alrik had been right.

Brad pulled her chair out. She pushed it back in. "I'm not staying."

Pressing the bouquet into her arms, he kissed her cheek. "Baby, please, let's talk about this."

He smelled good, woodsy and familiar. "There really isn't anything to talk about." She set the flowers on the table and pulled

the ring box from her purse. “I just wanted to give this back to you.”

His smile vanished when he saw the blue box in her hand. “Don’t say that. I want to talk this out, to make things right. Sit, please. I don’t want to throw us away like that.”

She set the ring box on the table between them. “It’s hard to think about *us* when all I can think about is you and Jeana.” She grit her teeth and blew out a breath. “My cousin? Of all people, you had to pick her to screw around with? I wish she’d never introduced us.”

He collapsed into his chair and rubbed his forehead, the muscles in his jaw twitching. “How many times do I have to apologize?”

“None. Not any more.” She shook her head, trying to keep her voice steady. She would not cry. Not here. Not in front of him. “You have your ring back. Please stop calling me and let me get on with my life. Please.”

“It’s your ring, Calleigh.” He slid the box toward her side of the table. “I gave it to you as a token of my love. That hasn’t changed.”

He looked up at her, his hazel eyes liquid. “Can you honestly say you don’t love me anymore?”

“I don’t want the ring.” Her voice cracked, betraying her emotions. Time to leave.

She turned to go but he stood and grabbed her hand. “We belong together, Calleigh. Please forgive me. Give me a second chance. I need you. My heart needs you.”

The warmth of his fingers curled around hers brought pleasant memories to the forefront of her mind. He sounded sincere. She could talk for a minute. She sat, and he followed suit, smiling again.

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Thank you.”

She smiled reluctantly. She shouldn’t be doing this. “You’re welcome.”

A waiter approached. “Welcome to Patois. May I take your order?”

“I’ll have a latte in a to-go cup, please.” It was the last thing she’d let Brad pay for.

“Another mimosa,” Brad said. The waiter left.

She sighed and pulled her hand back. “Let’s not play games, okay? What I feel doesn’t matter anymore.” She lowered her voice. “You cheated on me and I don’t think I can get past that.”

He steepled his fingers and tapped them against his chin. “I’m not the only one to blame here, you know.” He waved his hands in the air, as if trying to chase the truth away. “Jeana did the seducing. Blame her. I’m surprised by how willing you are to give up on us. I didn’t think you were a quitter.”

He leaned back, elbow on one arm of the chair, the French cuff of his shirt sliding back to reveal his Cartier Roadster. Not a single

chestnut curl strayed from his perfectly coiffed head. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you’d met someone else.”

“If you didn’t know better?” She frowned. “What does that mean?”

He sighed as if reluctant to speak. “You’re a mouse, Calleigh. A lovely mouse, but a mouse all the same.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m not a mouse.”

“No? Baby, how many men did you date before me? How many?”

She swallowed hard, fighting tears. “I barely had time to make friends, let alone find men to date. If it wasn’t for Jeana, I wouldn’t have even met you.” And how she wished she hadn’t. “I had responsibilities. You know that.”

“Stop using your mother and the studio as an excuse.” He downed the last sip of OJ and champagne.

The waiter returned with a to-go cup of coffee for her and a mimosa for Brad. “Are you ready to order?”

“Give us a few more minutes,” Brad said.

“Yes, sir.

“I’m not staying.” Calleigh shoved back from the table, coffee in her trembling hand. She turned, almost running into another patron as she hurried to leave.

“Calleigh, wait. I love you,” Brad called after her.

But she kept going. She didn’t want him to see how his words stung. She knew they were true. Men didn’t exactly hurdle each other to get at her, and she certainly wasn’t a Don Juanita like Jeana.

What if Jeana *had* seduced Brad? Family or not, the woman definitely had a little barracuda DNA in her. Maybe Calleigh was lumping too much of the blame on Brad. But what did it matter? He’d still cheated on her. Nothing could change that.

Blinking back tears, she tossed the coffee into the nearest trash can on her way back to the car. A deep breath steadied her nerves. Through the windshield, she could see Alrik’s eyes were closed. She heard muted singing before she even got in. Opening the door, the bellow of some Wagnerian opera assaulted her. Definitely not the station she’d left it on.

“How can you listen to that noise?” she snapped, cranking the volume down.

He glanced at her. “You were gone a long time. Where is your coffee?”

“I chatted longer than expected. I didn’t feel like coffee after that.” She started the car then busied herself with backing out. He didn’t need to know the sad, pitiful details of her love life.

He narrowed his eyes and grunted softly.

“Look, it’s no big deal,” she said. “C’mon, let’s go get you

something a little hipper than a sweatshirt and jeans."

The mall fascinated Alrik even more than she thought it would. He wanted to go into every store but she kept him moving until they got to Macy's. After riding the escalator twice to make him happy, she got him into the men's department.

Every clerk who went by was either dressed like they didn't care or was female. She was not about to leave him in the hands of another woman.

"Excuse me, could you help us?" She finally located a man who looked to be in his early thirties. From his artfully disarrayed hair to his pink and orange mitered-stripe shirt and red leather pants, she knew she'd found the clerk she'd been looking for. The sweet way he smiled at Alrik confirmed her thought. A little queer eye for the Viking guy. Perfect.

"What can I do for you, doll?" The man addressed Alrik more than her, a twinkle in his eye.

Alrik glanced at Calleigh.

She patted his arm. "My friend here needs some new clothes and I've got to go buy a birthday present. Do you think you could help him find something suitable to wear to a family function?"

"Meeting the parents, are we?"

"Meeting the uncles. But close enough." Should she mention he also needed underwear? She didn't want to get the clerk killed. Maybe she would just pick that up herself.

"So is this a down-home or downtown kind of get together?"

"A little of both. It's actually a birthday party for my uncle and he's a fashion photographer so the outfit has to be hip or he'll pick it apart."

"A fashion photographer? Who?" Curiosity danced in the clerk's eyes.

"Seamus McCarthy," she mumbled. She was not in the habit of dropping her uncle's name.

Two waxed brows shot up. "*The* Seamus McCarthy? The one responsible for that fabulous Versace campaign?"

"That would be the one. Can you help me?" Why wasn't she surprised this guy knew who her uncle was?

"Honey, it would be my pleasure." He winked at her and glanced at Alrik. "Literally." He laughed as though they had suddenly become best friends.

She turned to Alrik. "I'll be back in about half an hour or so." She leaned a little closer and spoke so only Alrik could hear. "Be on your best behavior, okay? Don't hurt him."

Alrik looked a little unsure but nodded. "Aye."

She caught the clerk's eye before she left. "Nothing too crazy,

okay?"

"Not to worry, sweetheart." The clerk waved a hand at her before turning to Alrik. "Come with me, handsome. We have work to do."

Judging by the look Alrik gave the man, she hoped half an hour wasn't too long.

After twenty minutes of wandering around the mall, the only thing she'd seen was a pair of shoes she thought Alrik might like. Trying to come up with a gift for her uncle was about as easy as holding sand in a sieve.

What Seamus didn't already own, he either didn't want or would buy when he did. Not the easiest man to shop for. Reluctantly, she settled on a black Cole Haan alligator belt, wincing at the price. Not the most exciting gift, but at least it was practical. The pope would sign up for a butt lift before her uncle stopped wearing black.

Bag in hand, she left accessories and headed back up to the men's department, wondering how well the clerk and the Viking were getting along. She glanced around. No blood on the carpet. So far so good.

She followed the arrow on the sign for the fitting rooms, thinking that was the best place to track them down. It was. The clerk was just coming out with an armful of clothes.

"There you are! Wait 'til you see our boy. Looks good enough to eat, if I do say so myself." The clerk pursed his glossed lips, clearly pleased with what he'd done.

Alrik walked out and stopped when he saw her, standing directly in front of the three-way mirror.

Her jaw went south at the sight of him.

He wore toffee-hued suede jeans, which thanks to the mirror behind him, she could see hugged the curves of his backside like cling wrap on Jell-O. An expanse of bronzed skin shone in the vee neck of the ivory ribbed sweater draping his upper body. The thin knit outlined his tapered torso perfectly.

The clerk leaned over. "Honey, your mouth is hanging open. But I can't say as I blame you. Do you know the boy doesn't wear underwear? Aye carumba!" He fanned himself dramatically.

Aye carumba, indeed. She pulled her chin up, wondering if she'd drooled on herself.

"Is this to your liking? There are other clothes…" Alrik motioned back toward the dressing room.

She cleared her throat. "Really, other clothes?"

He looked disappointed. "I will change."

"No, wait." Taking a few steps closer, she ran her hand through her hair and tried to breath. "You look…good, great…" *phenomenal, outstanding, lick-able* "…in those clothes, but I wouldn't mind seeing

the other stuff on you, too."

My own personal Viking fashion show, featuring the hottest twelve-hundred-year-old man I've ever seen. Heat bloomed over her skin. This shopping trip was becoming an exercise in personal indulgence, but after Brad's words, she didn't care.

The clerk sighed as Alrik disappeared to change, giving her a grin. "That is one hot hunk of man you've landed yourself, missy."

"Thanks. But he's just a friend, I guess."

Hope filled the man's eyes and his perfectly arched eyebrows shot up. "Is he…"

She shook her head. "I'm pretty sure he's straight."

The clerk sighed. "Do the world a favor and find out for sure, will you? Somebody ought to be enjoying all that man."

Yeah. Somebody ought to. Why are you such a chicken, Cal? He asked you to ask him to kiss you. He wouldn't do that if he were going to say no. Would he?

Clapping his hands, the clerk whistled. "This is a little dressier look I pulled together, in case the first one was too casual."

Alrik now wore flat front black dress pants in a loose, drapey fabric with a periwinkle blue silk shirt. He watched her, waiting for a reaction.

Using the pretense of touching the fabric, she coasted her fingertips over the brawny expanse of his chest. "Very nice. The silk, that is. The color does amazing things for your eyes."

"This is better, then?" His voice was quiet, just for her.

Warm curves of silk-covered muscle flexed beneath her palm. "I like both of them very much. You wear clothes very well."

"It is not a hard thing to do." He smiled, the pleasure in his eyes turning her insides syrupy.

"Which one do you like?" She'd buy him the store if he asked.

"Whatever pleases you, Calleigh lass."

With her hand still on his chest and her eyes locked on his crystal blues, she called to the clerk over her shoulder. "We'll take both outfits."

Alrik's fingers brushed the edge of her jaw. "Thank you for this kindness."

She shrugged, slightly embarrassed for a reason she couldn't name. "It's nothing. Stay here for a minute, okay? I think we should probably get you a few more things."

"As you wish."

Why couldn't all men be so agreeable? With the clerk trailing behind, she darted around the men's department like a woman on a mission, adding a better pair of jeans, a few casual T-shirts and a black leather jacket. She'd never had a Ken doll as a little girl, but she

was making up for that now.

Taking the items from the clerk, she headed back to the fitting rooms. “Alrik?”

“Aye.” He poked his head out of one of the stalls.

“Here, just a few more things. Try them on to make sure they fit and then we’ll get you some underwear and socks. I saw some shoes in the mall you might like, too.”

He opened the door further to take the stack of clothes from her. She inhaled. Shirtless was such a good look for him. He shook his head. “How much is this going to cost?”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s why Bank of America invented credit cards.”

“You are a very generous woman. I am honored you would do this for me.” He dropped the clothes on the bench and pulled her into the dressing room, one hand on her forearm, the other shutting the door. Already crammed with his large form, the cubicle’s small size forced them chest to chest.

His lids were heavy, his eyes a darker blue. Like distant thunder, his voice rumbled through her, thick and needy. “Ask me, lass. Let me thank you properly.”

She started to say, “ask you what” but she knew. Each breath was an attempt to speak, but she had no words; no refusal, no request. Part of her wanted to ask, wanted to tell him, wanted to demand—kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me and prove Brad wrong. Her lips parted, the words dancing on her tongue.

A knock on the door shattered her courage.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” The clerk’s sing-song tone grated after Alrik’s honeyed plea.

“Why don’t you hand out anything you want me to start ringing up?” His hand appeared over the top of the door.

Sighing, she grabbed a few items and opened the door, squeezing past Alrik. “We weren’t doing anything,” she mumbled.

“Mm-hmm. And I’m a choir boy, sweetheart.”

She glared at the clerk and hoped he wasn’t working on commission. “We weren’t.”

He took the clothes from her, weaving his head side to side. “Then maybe you should get back in there.”

Alrik wanted to throw his head back and let loose the fiercest war cry he knew. She’d been so close to asking. He had already imagined her full lips parting beneath his, the warmth of her sweet mouth, the touch of her velvet tongue.

That tongue of hers was so bold one moment, then so shy the next. He smiled, thinking of how quickly she had realized exactly

what he wanted her to do. Just two words. That's all she needed to say and he could kiss her.

Thor's hammer! He fisted his hand against the wall and rested his head against it. A more bewitching creature he could not imagine. Especially in that small skirt that showed off so much of her long legs. He wanted to run his hands up those legs, trail kisses from her ankles to her thighs and higher.

Everything about her invited a man to want more. She was a warm, crackling fire against the bitter winter's eve of Dagny's cold blonde beauty.

He looked at the pile of things Calleigh had brought him to try on, again shaking his head. Her generous spirit would be rewarded. All she had to do was ask.

Calleigh didn't want to think about the total as she handed her credit card to the clerk. She didn't want to tap into her inheritance any more than she had to, but she wouldn't be getting paid again until she found a new job.

Well, what was money for if not to spend? Brad had been after her constantly to let him invest the money, promising her he would do great things with it in the long run. Of course, her overly protective uncles had cautioned her when she announced her engagement, telling her a prenuptial agreement was the smartest thing to do, but she'd never brought it up, never though it necessary. Being in love had blinded her to a lot of things.

Now wearing Diesel jeans, a Hugo Boss T-shirt and a DKNY black leather jacket, Alrik followed her out into the mall, a full shopping bag in each hand.

She headed straight for the shoe store. The cheap white sneakers had to go. "Here, look at these."

Pointing at a pair of black lug-soled oxfords, she turned to see what he thought of them. He faced the food court, eyes closed, sniffing the air.

She tugged his jacket sleeve. "Do you like these shoes?"

"What is that smell? I must find it."

Inhaling deeply, she smiled. "That's Cinnabon."

"Sinning Bun?"

"Cinn-a-bon." She checked her watch then glanced toward the food court. "It is kind of time for lunch, isn't it?"

"I will have this Cinnabon." He headed toward the scent, bags swinging.

"Hey, wait! You need shoes." She trailed after him, trying to match his long stride.

By the time she caught up, he stood in front of the glass-

partitioned counter, watching a teenage girl spread thick swathes of snowy icing over a tray of cinnamon spirals still hot from the oven.

"I will have that." He pointed at the tray.

"Don't you want lunch first?" She had to admit, the buns smelled seductively good.

"Nay. I want this."

"We could take some home and eat them later." It was worth a shot. Cinnabon wasn't her idea of lunch. Not to mention the calories.

He tore his gaze from the pastries to look at her. "I vow I will not ask for anything more this day."

"I wasn't saying no, I was just trying to get something nutritious into you." *Now quit looking at me like that before I spread that frosting all over myself and see what that does for you.*

He smiled and her insides went as warm and gooey as the sticky, sugary topping on the buns. She turned to the girl behind the counter. "Two, please. And two bottles of water."

The girl boxed up the pastries and put them on a tray while another teen added two cups of ice and two bottles of water and rang them up.

Calleigh paid and took the tray, making her way through the maze of tables to one that was out of earshot of the other shoppers. They sat and she pushed one of the boxes toward Alrik.

He opened the box, grabbing the steaming bun with his fingers before she could stop him.

"No!" She smacked the back of his hand.

He dropped the bun.

Completely embarrassed that she had just treated him like a two-year old, she apologized. "Sorry. Are you okay? Those things are wicked hot."

"I am fine. Heat does not affect me." He shook his hand, flinging globs of icing into the air.

"Still, that stuff is the culinary equivalent of napalm. Let me see." She held out her hand.

He turned his palm up, offering it to her. Cradling his big hand in hers, she dipped a wad of napkins into her ice water and dabbed at his frosted fingers. "I guess it didn't hurt you after all. They don't look even slightly burned." *I could kiss them better. Or suck the rest of the icing off, whatever works for you.*

"Phoenixes are very hard to injure. But thank you for your kindness."

She eased her hand from his and held up the little plastic wrapped utensil package. "You're welcome. Here, try these."

He ripped out the knife and fork and dug into the bun. She grabbed his wrist as he was about to stuff a baseball-sized hunk into

his mouth.

"Phoenix or not, don't you think you should let that cool off just a little?"

"Nay. It looks so good, I want it right now."

"I know the feeling." She snapped her mouth shut too late to keep the words in, but ducked her head so he couldn't see her face. If only the food court would suddenly develop a sinkhole.

Mercifully, he changed the subject. "Have you thought about what change you would like to make in your life?"

"Yes, but not enough to know what I want to do. I'll decide soon, I promise."

"I am in no hurry. Good things are worth waiting for." The glitter in his eyes told her he'd heard her comment.

She busied herself with cutting her cinnamon bun into pieces, wondering if it was the steam from the pastry or his words heating her skin.

He moaned softly and she looked up. His eyes were closed and his head tipped back. One cheek bulged as he chewed a mouthful of cinnamon roll.

Now, there's a face to fuel the imagination. Naughty thoughts filled her head. She gulped her water, hoping the icy liquid would squelch the wildfire in her belly. Maybe she should just dump the cup over her head. "I'm guessing you like it?"

He opened his eyes and ran his tongue over his lips before answering her with a wicked grin. "I can think of only a few things that might taste better."

Chapter Six

Alrik loosened his grip on the door handle when Calleigh slowed the car to a stop. While the speed excited him, the closeness to other vehicles unnerved him more than he cared to admit.

"Now remember, try not to answer questions too specifically. Vague is better. If you say something you shouldn't have, make a joke of it." She ran a hand through her hair, tousling the waves around her face.

"Everything will be fine." He unbuckled the seatbelt like she had showed him. "You will see."

She twisted and reached into the back of the vehicle, leaning against his shoulder. He dropped his face into the mass of curls beside him, inhaling her warm, sweet scent. Odin's eye, he wanted her. His groin tightened.

She pulled back, the wrapped package for her uncle in her hand. "What are you doing?"

Caught, he stiffened and looked away. "Nothing."

"You were sniffing my hair, weren't you?"

"Aye," he groaned, reluctant to admit she was right. He glanced at her. His actions apparently amused her.

Her smile widened a bit. "That's a little weird but kind of sweet at the same time."

"Am I being dorky again?" He had a feeling dorky was not good.

Laughing, she shook her head. "You look too good to be considered dorky."

He glanced at the suede jeans and sweater, again touched by her generous spirit. "You were right. Trousers are better with underwear."

Crimson crept into her cheeks, staining her face with a rosy glow. He imagined she would look very much the same after being well-bedded.

"C'mon. Let's get this party started." She hopped out of the car.

He got out as well, admiring the outfit she had chosen as she came round his side. Under her wool overcoat she wore a sweater the color of the Irish sea and a short black leather skirt. Her legs, clad in sheer black fabric, disappeared into elaborately-worked boots that came over her knees. The glimpse of thigh between skirt and boot made his mouth water.

The urge to kiss her pierced him like one of Eros's arrows. He leaned against the car and inhaled. "You are a fair lass, Calleigh Siobhan McCarthy."

Her head dipped, heading her expression. "Vikings must have a warped sense of beauty."

With a gentle hand beneath her chin, he brought her face up and looked into her eyes. Her skin was so soft. “Why do you say such things? If I tell you that you are fair, I do not mean it as a jest.”

Gaze darting to the side, she sighed. “Sorry, I’m just not good at taking compliments. Lack of practice, I guess.”

“You must take what you want from life, Calleigh, or you will always want and never have.”

Her expression changed, her mouth twisting. When she looked at him, her copper eyes were filled with hurt.

“I’m not a mouse,” she whispered, a shudder of sadness in her voice.

“I did not say—”

“Kiss me.” She trembled like a leaf in the wind, and he sensed the effort it took for her to say those words.

Every muscle went tense with want. His hand swept up her cheek, tangling in her hair. He slid his other arm beneath her coat and pulled her close, her warmth radiating through the fabric of his clothes. *At last.*

She tipped her face toward his, her eyes still haunted.

He shook his head at the pain he saw there. “I do not know what others have done to you, but I will not hurt you, Calleigh lass. I promise you that.”

A tear flowed down her cheek, glistening like a rare gem. He wiped it away with the pad of his thumb, bending his head to brush his lips across hers. The touch of her mouth was more tempting than the spiced breads, the taste sweeter than the cinnamon buns they had shared.

A chill breeze ruffled the hair on his neck, but did little to dampen the heat building in his belly. Groaning against her lips, he pulled her closer. The soft warmth of her body invited thoughts of long nights and slow lovemaking. Her sweet scent made him hunger to taste more of her.

She pressed herself along the length of his body and kissed him back with a passion to shame the Valkyrja. Her hands sought his shoulders. She clung to him as if a raging river might sweep her away.

The tip of his tongue danced across her lips, teasing the supple flesh. She moaned softly and opened to his advance. The sound encouraged him but he held back, kissing her tenderly. Someone had hurt her, that much he knew. The thought enraged him, made him want to protect her, to keep her from harm the rest of her life. To make her *his*.

He caressed the velvet nape of her neck, her blissful murmurs fanning his need to bring their bodies into contact. He splayed his fingers over the small of her back and pressed her hips against his

thighs, his body rigid with need. She tensed at the feel of him, her mouth stilling.

He released her then, not wishing her think him some beast driven uncontrollable by the lusts of his flesh. Even if she was responsible for raising the beast. And causing the lust.

She settled her forehead against his chest, tucking her arms between them. A shiver ran through her.

So as not her to frighten her any further, he wrapped his arms around her loosely, trying to warm her against the chill of the evening. But she still trembled and stayed so quiet he could not tell her mood. Never had a woman responded this way to his kiss before. Helplessness choked him. “Are you…did I…”

Leaning back in his arms, a shy smile turned up the corners of her pleasure-stung lips. “I’m fine. Better than fine. You’re a very good kisser.”

She paused for a moment, as if reconsidering her words. New color flushed her cheeks and she plucked at some imaginary thread on his tunic. “Actually, that’s the best kiss I’ve ever had. Not that I’ve had many.”

He grinned, greatly relieved and suddenly proud. “I am a man of many talents.”

“I bet you are.” She patted his chest, stepped out of his embrace and picked her uncle’s gift off the ground. “We better get inside before someone comes looking for us.”

She started toward the house then paused again. “Let’s just keep the kiss between us, okay? As far as my uncles go, we’re just friends.”

Her words pricked, but he understood. She thought her family would not find him a suitable mate for her. Just as well. He was a Phoenix, mate to no woman. But that truth did little to keep images of Dagny from sweeping through him, colder than the whistling wind.

“As you wish,” he said, working hard to keep his voice even. Grant her changes and be done. That was what he had come for and all he would do. With the taste of her still on his tongue, he followed her into the house.

“Calleigh, me love!” Uncle Corrigan threw his arms around her, lifting her feet off the ground in a crushing embrace.

“I can’t breathe,” Calleigh wheezed, happy Jeana was nowhere in sight.

“Corrigan, put the wee lass down before ye flatten her.” His wife, Moreen, cuffed his shoulder.

He set Calleigh’s feet back on the floor and she inhaled deeply before speaking. “Thank you, Aunt Moreen. Your husband doesn’t know his own strength.”

“Sorry, love.” Corrigan grinned at her, his brown eyes sparkling.

The door shut and Moreen tugged at her sleeve. “Aren’t ye forgetting something, dear?” Her aunt’s eyes lit up, a mix of delight and curiosity glittering in their mossy depths. With her fading titian curls and rectangular wire rimmed glasses, she could have passed for a young Mrs. Claus.

“Uncle Seamus’s present is right here.” Calleigh brushed a bit of dirt off one corner before offering the package to her aunt. There was no getting out of explaining the guest she’d brought, but it was worth a try.

Aunt Moreen crossed her arms and pursed her rose-painted lips. “Well then, that’s not what I’m talking about, cheeky girl. There’s a *man* standing behind ye, and he isn’t yer fiancé. Not by a long haul. Care to do some explainin’? Or at least some introducin’? Or have ye lost yer manners altogether?”

“Oh. Yeah.” She smiled sheepishly as she glanced over her shoulder at the Viking. He was so not Brad. The difference was as obvious as a showgirl in a gospel choir. Her mouth still burned with Alrik’s fiery kiss and her knees weakened at the memory of what had just occurred in the driveway.

“Uncle Corrigan, Aunt Moreen, this is a…friend of mine, Alrik. Brad and I are…on hiatus.”

Her uncle’s wooly brows shot up in surprise. “Hiatus? Hmph. Now there’s a non-answer if I ever heard one, but I’m not complainin’.”

“I’ll explain later. Please,” Calleigh said, twisting her hands.

“Alrik, is it? Welcome.” With a wary eye, her uncle extended his hand and Alrik shook it.

“Thank you, sir.”

“No sirs in this house, lad. Words mean little compared to deeds. Corrigan will do just fine.”

Alrik nodded. Calleigh and Moreen rolled their eyes in unison.

Moreen cuffed her husband’s shoulder for the second time. “Corrigan, let the lad be. My, my, ye are a bit of all right, aren’t ye? Any friend of Calleigh’s is a friend of ours.” In the true spirit of Irish hospitality her aunt did to Alrik what she did to every guest that entered her home. She hugged him.

Calleigh bit her tongue to keep from laughing at the expression on his face. He definitely hadn’t been expecting that. To his credit, he hugged back.

Hoping to stave off further questions, she asked one of her own. “Where’s Uncle Seamus?”

“Himself is in the kitchen, fixin’ a drink for his newest ladylove.” Moreen pressed her palm to her cheek and shook her head, curls bobbing.

Calleigh laughed. “I don’t know why you’re surprised, Aunt Moreen. That man changes girlfriends more than most men change their underwear.”

She cringed as soon as the word underwear left her tongue. Alrik opened his mouth to say something. Calleigh quickly grabbed his hand. “C’mon, let’s get the rest of the introductions over.”

Moreen chuckled, linking her arm through Alrik’s on the other side. “Now don’t mind Calleigh’s uncles, lad. They stand guard on the wee lass like two pit bulls at a butcher shop.”

“Oh, great. Now, I’m a pound of hamburger?” Calleigh asked.

Her uncle winked. “Ye’ll always be filet in my book, lovey.”

The delicious aromas of soda bread, her aunt’s famous lamb stew and rhubarb crumble greeted them as the three walked into the kitchen behind Corrigan.

“Well, Seamus, seems we had it right about that Brad fellow.” Corrigan tipped his head back in Alrik’s direction, and lowered his voice, but not enough to keep the trio behind him from hearing. “Calleigh’s found herself a new beau. All brawn an’ no brains by the looks of him.”

Calleigh sputtered, indignant on several levels. “He is *not* my beau. He’s just a friend. A *friend*. And he has plenty of brains so just keep your remarks to yourself, Uncle Corri.”

Seamus grinned and finished pouring a drink. “Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.”

Impeccably dressed in his usual head to toe designer black, her Uncle Seamus winked at Calleigh before handing the drink in his hand to the willowy, cat-eyed Nubian goddess at his elbow. “This *friend*, does he have a name?”

“Uncle Seamus, this is Alrik Gunn.”

“Alrik, pleased to meet you.” Alrik just nodded. The two men shook hands, then Seamus introduced the woman beside him.

“This is Badu. She’s doing the new Dolce campaign I’m shooting. Badu, this is my lovely niece, Calleigh and her *friend*.”

The model smiled at Alrik but held her hand out to Calleigh, her long, slender fingers tipped by perfectly shaped natural nails. “It is my great pleasure to meet you. Your uncle speaks highly of you.”

Each word was distinctly pronounced, the syllables hit with precision, the consonants full and round. The woman had the voice of a diplomat.

“Hi, Badu. Thanks. Nice to meet you, too,” Calleigh said.

“Your boots are very beautiful. They are Dior, no?” Badu pointed to Calleigh’s feet.

“Thank you. Yes, they are Dior. My uncle gave them to me for Christmas. Hey—” She grabbed the edge of the counter.

Seamus lifted Calleigh's foot, twisting it so he could see the sole of the boot. "Just as I suspected, this is the first time you've worn 'em, too."

Calleigh stomped her foot down and out of her uncle's grasp. "Uncle Seamus, please! Where am I supposed to wear $1200 boots?"

"How do you know what they cost? An' that's retail by the way, which I never pay." He frowned and crossed his arms.

"I looked them up on eBay."

Seamus shook his head. "I should have known. You're addicted to that bloody site." He nodded toward Alrik. "So, what happened to Brad? You get wise to him, did you?"

"I don't want to discuss that right now." Calleigh thrust the wrapped package into her uncle's hands. "Happy Birthday."

Alrik leaned over. "What is E-Bay?"

"Where've you been, lad, living in a cave?" Seamus chuckled and Corrigan joined in.

"Nay…" Alrik glanced at Calleigh.

"He's from Norway. He's here studying Germanic history with the International Visitors program at NYU. You know those academics, lots of book knowledge but when it comes to modern life…" She hoped the snippet of info would satisfy her uncles.

Moreen lifted the lid off the pot bubbling on the stove, intensifying the aroma of lamb stew wafting through the kitchen.

"I have not smelled anything so wonderful since the Cinnabons at the mall," Alrik said, moving closer to look into the pot.

"Wait 'til you taste it, lad. This dish was one of the main reasons I landed Calleigh's uncle." Moreen grinned at her husband.

"Woman, you know that isn't true." Corrigan slipped his arms around her waist. "I married you for yer childbearing hips and fiery disposition. Yer cookin' was just a fringe benefit."

As her aunt cuffed her uncle's shoulder for the third time, Calleigh changed the subject. "I guess the twins couldn't make it home for the weekend but I expected to see Bridget."

"She's at dance, but she should be home any minute. You know she's got a feis coming up at the end of the month." Done stirring, Moreen put the lid back on the pot and wiped her hands on a towel.

Calleigh nodded. She knew about the feis and had already agreed to attend Bridget's next dance competition, even though it wouldn't be easy. Before her mother died, she'd looked forward to each feis. Of course, she'd had her own students entered in them back then, too. "Bridget's getting pretty good now, isn't she?"

"This is her first feis at the Open level," Moreen said.

Not a minute later, they heard the muffled slam of a car door, followed shortly by a red-cheeked girl in ringlets bursting through the

kitchen door.

"Thank you, Mrs. Malaley," she called out before closing the door. "Happy Birthday, Uncle Seamus. Cousin Calleigh!"

"Hi, Bridget," Calleigh answered with a smile. Had she looked that way at thirteen?

The young girl embraced Calleigh before launching into a stream of chatter. "I'm so nervous about the feis. But excited, too! For my Set dance, I'm doing "The King of the Fairies". You are coming, aren't you? You promised you know." Bridget bobbed up and down on her toes.

Calleigh laughed. "I promised I'd be there and I will."

"Here now, show us a bit, Bridget. I don't think my lovely friend Badu has ever seen *real* dancing." Seamus grinned at his youngest niece.

Bridget looked at her parents. "I'm not supposed to dance on the wood floors in my hard shoes."

Corrigan crossed his arms.

"As a wee present to me, on me birthday, forget about yer blasted floors." Seamus deliberately heightened his Irish accent, causing Bridget to giggle.

Moreen grinned and jabbed her husband in the ribs. He winced. "This once and only this once." He pointed at Seamus. "And I'm sending you the refinishing bill."

"Grab an end, lad." With a victorious smile, Seamus directed Alrik to help him move the kitchen table.

Bridget handed her mother a music CD as she came back in from fetching a portable stereo from another room.

With a glance at Alrik, Bridget kicked off her sneakers before slipping one foot into her hard dancing shoe and lacing it over her poodle sock. "Where's Brad?"

Calleigh didn't want to lie to her cousin, but she didn't want to share the gory details, either. She knelt at Bridget's feet and started lacing her other shoe. Quietly, in a voice she hoped only Bridget could hear, she explained. "Brad broke a promise to me. After that, I knew he wasn't the right man. Better to know the kind of man he is now, than after we were married. Understand?"

"So is that guy your new boyfriend?" Bridget's whisper was full of curiosity.

Calleigh smiled. "No, he's just a friend."

"Too bad, 'cause he's way cuter than Brad." She snuck another admiring glance at Alrik.

"Don't you have a jig to do?"

"I guess so." Bridget stood up, smoothing the legs of her practice shorts.

Calleigh glanced at the small group who, except for her aunt and uncle's twin sons away at college, represented the remainder of her family. Had any of them liked Brad?

With the kitchen table back against the wall and chairs pushed out of the way, Seamus stood waiting, Badu at his side. Moreen waited to push play on the boom box until her daughter finished adjusting her socks.

"Okay, I'm ready." Bridget moved to the middle of the kitchen, arms stiffly at her sides, chin up, feet crossed in front of each other.

Her mother pushed play and the plaintive sounds of Irish fiddles filled the room.

Bridget's feet began to move, stepping and twisting to the infectious music. Her curls bobbed in time to the lively beat, her face lit with a brilliant smile. "Dance with me, Calleigh."

"Oh no, I can't—"

"Go on, lass. Those boots deserve to have some fun," Seamus said.

"You can do this dance?" Alrik skeptical smirk seemed to say he thought otherwise.

"I used to—"

Moreen interrupted. "She taught in her mother's studio for years. Not only *can* she do it, but she's got the medals and trophies to prove how *well* she can do it. She even had the chance to dance principal for *Irish Fire*."

At the name of the touring dance show, Calleigh's head snapped around. "Aunt Moreen. Please."

"C'mon lovey, make your dear departed mother proud." A sweet smile punctuated Moreen's words.

"No." Calleigh shook her head.

"If she cannot do it, she cannot do it," Alrik said, shrugging.

"I can so do it. But I'm only dancing a few steps." Calleigh complied, secretly pleased her past achievements had not been forgotten. She moved into place beside her cousin.

Picking up the steps as though she'd danced the jig yesterday, she matched the younger girl's moves with perfect timing.

Calleigh lost herself in the dance, the music transporting her to a place where all that mattered was the pure joy of movement. Her mother's mantra filled her head. *Ice in the body, fire in the feet.*

Laughing, she danced faster and faster, keeping time with Bridget's flying footsteps. The music came to a sweeping conclusion and the two cousins finished their steps with heads held high. Their small audience erupted in applause.

"Well done, lasses! Now that's a birthday dance for sure." Seamus grinned, thoroughly pleased.

Breathing harder than she cared to show, Calleigh just nodded. A

pearl of sweat trickled down between her breasts. The jig winded her, but that was no surprise. She hadn't had a reason to dance in many months.

Alrik watched Calleigh with interest. The flush of her cheeks and the exaggerated rise of her chest brought to mind a completely different dance. One that began with another kiss like they had shared outside.

The passion of her kiss had surprised him. He had not expected such a kiss from a woman whose eyes held such pain. But she was happy now, here with her family. Even if she was worried that he would do something to shame her.

He applauded along with her family, grinning at her pleasure while he wondered if the heat of the kiss had lingered on her lips as it had his. Catching his gaze, she quickly looked away, the flush on her cheeks deepening. His belly tightened. The kiss had indeed stayed with her.

Corrigan clapped Alrik on the back. "Would you care for a draught, lad?"

"Aye, that I would." A draught of the fair-eyed lass in front of me.

"Guinness to your liking? Or will you be wanting something weaker?" Corrigan drank deeply from a tall glass of dark liquid.

Alrik smiled. They had so little idea who they were dealing with. As chieftain of his clan, he had held his own at feast times. "I will have the same as you."

"The lad wants a Guinness, Seamus." Corri chuckled as if he shared a private jest with his brother.

"So pour him one, Corri. It's my birthday. You're supposed to be waiting on me."

"You fixed a drink for Badu."

"And for good reason." Seamus turned to where his date stood with the other women by the stove and let his gaze wander over her figure. "She's a mite lovelier than this lad."

Alrik glanced at the dark-skinned woman. She was beautiful but too thin. Calleigh's curves were made for a man's pleasure. Corrigan opened a can of Guinness, the popping sound muted by the women's laughter.

The dark ale sluiced down the side of the glass Corrigan tilted. When he finished pouring, he set the glass in front of Alrik. "There ye are."

He reached for it, ready to show Calleigh's uncles what he was made of.

"Not so fast." Corrigan blocked his hand. Alrik bristled. What game was this?

“Guinness needs to set for a bit. But like a fine woman, it’s worth waiting for.” Seamus laughed at his own words.

So Alrik waited, watching as the mud colored brew cleared, separating into a creamy head and a sparkling brown body. The color of the ale matched the deepest part of Calleigh’s eyes. Would it be as intoxicating?

“Well, go on then. Are you going to drink it or stare it to death?” Corrigan asked.

Seamus lifted his own glass and smirked. “*Skal*!”

Corrigan grinned and raised his mug. “*Skal*, indeed.”

Knowing full well they were playing with him, Alrik responded in kind. *“Go raibh tú leathuair ar Neamh sula mbíonn a fhios ag an diabhal go bhfuil tú marbh.”*

Calleigh’s head swiveled toward him. “What did you just say?”

“He said, ‘May you be a half hour in heaven before the devil knows you’re dead’. In perfect Irish Gaelic.” The smirk on Seamus’s face vanished. Corrigan’s jaw hung open.

“You speak Gaelic?” Calleigh’s eyes were round with surprise.

Nodding in answer to her question, Alrik gave her a wink, picked up the glass and downed half the bitter brew.

“Hold on, lad. You’ll be polluted in no time drinking like that.” Seamus reached for Alrik’s arm, but pulled back at the last, perhaps thinking better of it.

Calleigh stepped between Alrik and her uncles as Corri refilled Alrik’s glass. “What are you two doing?”

“Just keeping the lad in Guinness, love,” Corri said.

She narrowed her eyes. “I realize you two think it’s your personal duty to torment every man who comes within a two mile radius of me but getting him drunk is inexcusable.”

“I can handle my drink, Calleigh.” Alrik’s voice held a note of overconfidence.

Whirling around, she intended to warn him about her uncles once again. A line of tan foam coated his upper lip. The urge to lick the frosting of Guinness off his mouth veered her thoughts in a different direction. “Um…yeah, I’m sure you can.”

“You boys put that table back then find your seats in the dining room.” Moreen handed out orders all around. “Seamus, you’re at the head since it’s your birthday. Bridget, light the candles, please. Calleigh, help me with this food, will you?”

“Sure.” Her gaze stayed locked with Alrik’s for a split second more. She’d tasted that hot mouth not an hour ago.

Matches in hand, Bridget came up beside him. “You have foam on your face.”

He looked down at her, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth. “Is that better?”

She laughed. “Boys are so messy. Want to help me light the candles?”

“I would be honored to assist such a surefooted lass.”

Giggling some more, Bridget led him into the dining room.

Admiring the view of the Viking’s backside, Calleigh missed her aunt’s instructions.

“Calleigh Siobhan! Quit your mooning and get the crumble out of the oven before it burns.”

“I wasn’t mooning.” She slipped her hands into oven mitts before opening the oven door and lifting the bubbling pan onto a hotplate.

“Sure ye weren’t.” Moreen gave her a knowing smile.

“He’s just a friend, really.” Calleigh sighed. Why did her family make such an issue over every man in her life?

“So we’re kissin’ friends now, are we?” Moreen asked.

Calleigh’s heart thudded in her chest. “What are you talking about?” Heat wafted up from the oven, floating the curls around Calleigh’s face and tickling her cheeks.

Moreen stopped ladling the stew into a tureen and parted the kitchen window curtains. She tipped her head toward the glass. An outside light illuminated Calleigh’s Volvo in the driveway right outside.

“So?” Nothing escaped this woman.

“So yer cheeks have gone scarlet as that rhubarb.”

“It’s just the heat from the stove.” Closing the oven door, she hid her face from further inspection.

“Don’t look so stung, lass.” Moreen went back to ladling. “You deserve a good man in your life, and none of us thought Brad was the one for you anyway. I know Jeana introduced you two, but that girl’s not the best judge of character herself. Seamus only invited her because you two seem to pal around. Not that she could be bothered to show up this.” Moreen sniffed. “At least she’s only related on your mother’s side.”

The truth in her aunt’s words made Calleigh want to lash out. “What makes you so sure Brad wasn’t the right one? And what makes you think Alrik is? You don’t even know him.” *I don’t even know him.*

Moreen cupped her niece’s cheek with a warm, well-lined palm. “I know this much. Brad didn’t deserve you. You’re too good a woman for the likes of that eejit. Besides, he always seemed shady to me. I know you don’t want to talk about what happened, but if you’re broken up, I’m glad for it.”

“I never said we were broken up. And you can’t judge Alrik on the short time he’s been here.”

“He’s polite, sweet to Bridget, doesn’t seem the least bit shaken by your uncles…doesn’t hurt that he speaks the mother tongue, either.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing. He could be an ax murderer.”

Moreen handed her the soup tureen to carry to the table. “Merciful Joseph, an ax murderer? I doubt that. I will say this, you never looked at Brad the way you look at this one.”

The conversation wore her down. “Shouldn’t we serve this before it gets cold?”

With an understanding smile, her aunt nodded. “Lead the way, love.”

The glow from the candles sparkled off the Galway crystal holders. Muted prisms danced over the Limrick lace tablecloth, caressing the lines of the antique bone china. Calleigh set the tureen of stew in front of Seamus, as befitted the guest of honor.

He was at one end of the table, seated at the head as Moreen had instructed. To his right sat Badu, then an empty seat for Moreen, then Corrigan at the other end. To Seamus’s left sat Alrik, then Bridget, then another empty chair.

Calleigh pursed her lips in mild irritation. She wanted to sit beside Alrik. Bridget’s sudden infatuation with the Viking had been cute for the first five minutes.

“Bridget, mind your manners. Let your cousin sit beside her guest,” Moreen chided her daughter.

“But, Ma, he’s telling us a story about the Viking goddess, Freya.”

Calleigh flashed Alrik a look she hoped he would understand as cease and desist. He ignored it.

“Bridget Clare, do as your mother tells you.” The warning in Corrigan’s voice was plain.

“I will change seats with Bridget.” Alrik stood and pulled out Calleigh’s chair before helping Bridget switch places with him. Moreen smiled like she’d just won something. Calleigh sat, stifling the urge to kick her aunt under the table.

“So, what’s this story you’re telling?” Calleigh asked.

“It’s about Freya’s feather coat and how she used it to transform herself into a bird and fly across the sky,” Bridget chimed in before Alrik could answer.

“She did that in order to find her beloved husband, Odin, who had disappeared.” Alrik mimicked the others and placed his napkin on his lap.

“I promise to tell you the rest of the tale later, Bridget,” he said.

Bridget huffed and Moreen shot her a look. “That’s enough, Bridget. Mind your manners in front of company. Corri, bless the food before it gets cold, will you?”

Corrigan offered a blessing in Gaelic then Seamus started filling

plates.

Calleigh was passing bread to Corrigan when Alrik's hand brushed her thigh as he pulled his chair in, leaving a trail of heat on her skin. She nearly choked on her wine.

"Are you all right, dear?" Moreen looked concerned.

"Fine," Calleigh sputtered. *If you consider being all warm and tingly fine. Which it is. Just not here.*

Alrik leaned over and whispered in her ear. "I did not mean to touch you unbidden."

"Are you sure, love?" her aunt asked.

"Positive." Calleigh nodded, slightly disappointed by Alrik's confession. "Wine just went down the wrong way. Your lamb stew is wonderful, as always."

"Aye, it is as good as your hospitality is kind." Alrik slanted a glance at Calleigh. "Tis a clever woman who can warm a man inside and out."

Moreen blushed. Corrigan dropped his spoon and Seamus crowed with laughter. "You've got a smooth talker, there, Calleigh. I daresay I could learn a thing or two from the lad."

Calleigh smiled politely. So Alrik thought she was a clever woman? Would he still think so when she told him what her first change was?

Chapter Seven

Alrik did not mind Calleigh's silence on the way home. Riding in the car while it was daylight was bothersome enough. At night, the ride distressed him a great deal more.

Lights came toward them at alarming speeds, blurring like the dancing lights of the Valkyrja that were sometimes visible in the Northern sky. He ducked the first time, but held himself still when she laughed softly at his actions. She would not ask him to kiss her again if she thought him timid as a child.

When she turned the car off, he exhaled the breath he had been holding.

"Riding in cars isn't really your thing, is it?" The smile on her face was sweet, not mocking.

"Not entirely, nay."

After they got out, Calleigh pushed a button on the small black box hanging from her keys and the car beeped. "C'mon. Let's go inside and I'll make us some hot chocolate."

He raised his brows.

"Do you know what that is? Have you ever had it?" she asked.

"Aye, I know the drink but I have not had it since I was in England."

"When were you in England?" Wisps of icy breath spiraled from her mouth.

"In the year 1715. Hot chocolate was very popular. My charge was wealthy, so I had it several times. I liked it very much." So had his charge.

The spoiled daughter of a wealthy merchant, Amelia Maxwell Sinclair had gotten the talisman from her father. The attempt to please his brat failed miserably when Amelia had desired more from Alrik than the Phoenix was willing to give. Fortunately, he had not shared with Amelia that a Phoenix must do whatever a charge commanded of them. For all her begging and pouting, she had never phrased her words in a proper command.

Calleigh laughed as she unlocked the door to her home. "Always rely on the kindness of strangers, do you?"

"Strangers are rarely kind." He could not recall the last time one of his charges had regarded him as something more than just a source of good fortune. Most of them treated him as though he were merely one more possession, as though he owed them something. He smiled softly. Calleigh had bought him gifts of clothing. Calleigh had taken him to meet her family.

He shut the door and helped her out of her coat. Inhaling her

delicious scent, he leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Did I behave in a manner that pleased you tonight?”

She shivered and the desire to warm her pulsed through him.

“You did just fine,” she answered.

“So perhaps you will reward me?” *With a kiss*. He tossed her coat over the couch.

She pulled away. Her smile did not reach her eyes. “I think now might be a good time to tell you I’m ready to make my first change.

“As you wish.” Alrik’s gaze cooled, his face impassive. He nodded and stood waiting.

“What is your first change?” His tone was matter-of-fact.

She hesitated, unsure how he would react when she told him. “I can change whatever part of my life I want?”

“Aye. The choice is yours.”

Taking a deep breath, Calleigh exhaled slowly. The kiss she’d shared with him had made her heart ache and her family’s unkind words about Brad had only made her feel worse. She knew they were right, but she didn’t want them to be. There was one way to fix everything. One way to make things right.

“I want…I want Brad and I to be together. I want us to be married. And I want the reason for our breakup not to have happened.” She blurted out the words, hoping she wouldn’t have to specifically mention the cheating.

Brad’s cheating aside, she still missed him. Kissing Alrik had raised questions and feelings of guilt. Maybe she shouldn’t love Brad anymore, but she did. Everyone deserved a second chance, didn’t they? If they were married, and the cheating had never happened, they would be happy together. He’d have no reason to cheat.

A second chance for Brad to prove he loved her. To prove that Jeana had been the instigator of the cheating. Her aunt and uncles would see how wrong they’d been about Brad. And this way, no one would know that Brad had cheated on her.

One chance. That was all he was getting. If Brad screwed up this time, they were utterly, completely, without a doubt done.

“This is your desire?” Although Alrik’s voice was emotionless, Calleigh still wanted to defend her decision.

“He still loves me. I know he does. And I still have feelings for him. Yes, this is what I want.”

Alrik nodded, dropping his arms down by his sides. “With the power of the Phoenix, I grant this change.”

The wings of fire Calleigh had only thought she’d glimpsed once before unfurled over his shoulders. The feather-flames crackled and snapped, glazing his skin with a crimson glow.

There was no heat, but she stepped back anyway. The air wavered as the fire wrapped around him. The blazing wings enfolded him until she could no longer see his face.

The inferno flared brighter, intensifying, then snuffed itself out from the floor up, like a burning fuse. The last flickering flames disappeared before her at eye level.

Alrik was gone. A ring of pale ashes marked the spot where he'd been standing.

Was that it? Calleigh stood there, unsure what to do. What happened now? Was she married?

She looked down at her hand. No ring. Nothing seemed different.

Maybe it hadn't worked. Or maybe it just hadn't worked yet. She wondered if she should clean up the ashes or leave them. Had he said anything about what to do with them? She couldn't remember.

Gathering Snickers from around her feet, she did the only thing that made sense. She went to bed.

* * *

Beep, beep, beep…

Calleigh opened one eye. She didn't remember changing the setting on her alarm clock from radio to buzzer.

Reaching to swat the annoying thing off, she nearly knocked over a lamp that hadn't been there last night.

She sat up. That wasn't her nightstand. These weren't her sheets. This wasn't her bedroom.

The pillow next to hers was indented. She could hear the shower running. Someone had slept beside her. She was not alone. Her heart thumped in her chest, cold panic raising the hairs on the back of her neck. Where was she?

From the pale gray walls and exposed-wire halogen lighting to the black leather chair and stainless steel and glass nightstands, every nuance of the place was sleek and modern…and cold.

Slipping out of bed, the stained concrete beneath her feet was warm. Radiant heat. Whoever lived here had money. Tiptoeing to the closest window, she pulled back the gunmetal silk drapes.

The view astounded her. Forget money. Whoever lived here had seriously deep pockets. Central park spread out below, the people walking through its winding paths mere dots of color.

Who *did* live here? She glanced around, looking for some sign. Maybe in the closet.

She stopped short at the sight of herself in the full length mirror. Her hair was straight. Stick straight. She shook her head. Her once

curly mop fell back into place like a fringe curtain.

Odder still, she wore a skimpy black nightie trimmed in coffee-colored lace. She plucked at the shiny fabric. Silk.

The shower shut off. Her heart leapt again. She should hide. But where? The closet.

She hurried inside and peered through the crack between door and frame.

Brad walked out of the bathroom wearing a white monogrammed robe. He toweled his hair as he crossed the room.

Dumbstruck, Calleigh glanced down at her left hand. A sparkling solitaire winked back at her. Feeling like a fool, she walked out of the closet.

"I see you're up." He kissed her cheek. "Did you make coffee?"

"We're married," she whispered.

He playfully smacked her backside on his way into the walk-in. "For a whole week now. Or hasn't it sunk in yet?"

But this wasn't Brad's apartment. Although, it was certainly his taste.

"No…I guess it hasn't." She was married to Brad.

"So, is there coffee?" He buttoned his shirt while he talked to her, his eyes on the mirror.

"Shouldn't we be on our honeymoon?"

"Cal, you know I've got the Layton-Miller estate to finalize. We talked about this. You agreed to wait until I wrapped this up."

"Oh yeah, I am. Totally." The black leather belt he buckled reminded her of the one she'd bought for her uncle's birthday.

"That's my girl. Now, about that coffee…"

"I just got up, I didn't make any yet."

"I'll just grab a cup at the office then. Try to finish packing your stuff in the next few days. Today would be even better. I need to get the movers in there to empty that place. The realtor already has two prospective buyers lined up."

"Buyers? What stuff?"

"Where's your head this morning?" He snapped his watch bracelet closed. "The rest of your Brooklyn stuff."

"We're selling my brownstone?" That couldn't be right. Had she really agreed to that?

"I don't have time to go through this again. We discussed it, it's a done deal. I have to go. Walk me out." He grabbed his briefcase.

Calleigh followed him. The bedroom was one of the few actual rooms in the apartment. The rest of it opened up loft style into a huge concrete and steel space with floor to ceiling windows.

Snatching his overcoat from a twisted metal rack by the doors of what looked like a freight elevator, he hit a button on the wall. The

lift hummed as it traveled toward them.

He ran his fingers through her hair. “That Japanese straightening thing really did wonders, didn’t it?”

So that’s what had happened. “Yeah. Wonders.”

“I might be late tonight with all this paperwork to be finished, so if you want to spend some extra time at the gym, feel free.” He pecked her on the mouth as the doors opened behind him.

Gym? What gym? “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“See you later.”

“Bye.” The doors shut and he was gone.

She was married to Brad. Alrik had done everything he’d promised. Amazing.

She walked around the apartment, inspecting the place. Very few things looked familiar to her. By the ivory leather couch, there was a picture of her parents newly framed in black metal. On the kitchen counter she found the Belleek spoon rest that had been her mom’s.

She returned to the bedroom to take a better look in the closet. Her clothes were there. Well, some of them anyway. Most of the stuff on her side she didn’t recognize. The styles and colors didn’t look like things she would’ve bought.

In the bathroom, her bright blue hair dryer and hot pink toothbrush drew the eye like bits of obscene flotsam in the pristine sea of white ceramic and brushed chrome.

After a shower, she found a bathrobe and slipped it on. She wandered around, searching, searching. The apartment was too quiet. The something she was missing was so obvious she couldn’t name it.

Maybe talking it out would help.

“Coffeepot?” No.

“House plants?” No, but they would help.

“Candles?” Another good idea, but not it either.

Why couldn’t she think of it? “For Pete’s sake, just spit it out. What’s wrong? What’s missing? C’mon, think. Cat got your tongue?”

Cat. “Snickers! Here, baby!”

She called and searched but to no avail. Her fuzzy baby wasn’t here. None of his toys, not his cat bed that he never slept in anyway, no food dishes, nothing, not a cat hair in sight.

Calleigh dialed Brad’s cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Brad, it’s me—“

“Honey, I’m in a meeting, let me call you back—“

“No. Where’s Snickers?”

Brad’s voice lowered to a whisper. “He’s at the groomers, you took him there yesterday. What *is* wrong with you?”

“Then where’s all his stuff?”

"At the brownstone, waiting to be picked up like everything else."

"Wait a minute, he stayed at the groomers overnight? Why?"

"Can we talk about this later? I really have to go. And seriously, get a little caffeine in your system or something. You're not making much sense today." He hung up.

Her heart slowed to a normal rhythm. Snickers just hadn't moved in yet. That's all. For a week, though? Weird, but at least she knew where he was.

She didn't want to call Brad back and ask him why she didn't have a job to go to, so she decided to ignore that for the moment and head out to Brooklyn instead. At least she could get Snickers' things.

Once dressed in jeans and a T-shirt she recognized, she took the elevator down. It didn't surprise her to find the building had a doorman.

"Hi…Dexter." Thank goodness for name tags.

"Morning, Mrs. Volk."

Hearing her married name made her smile.

"Do you have the keys to my car? I can't seem to find them."

"Your car, ma'am? I thought you sold that to Dr. Welborn in 9B?"

"Oh. Yes, you're right. Sorry, habit." Her mother's car was gone, too? Good thing she knew her way around the subway system.

* * *

Sheets of newspaper littered the floor of the living room. Boxes towered in stacks marked *Goodwill* and *Storage*. The walls and windows were bare. Her rugs were rolled and bound with packing tape. No sign of the ring of ashes anywhere.

The home she'd grown up in looked abandoned and sad. With all its trappings packed away, her home was somehow less itself. The happy memories seemed as thin and distant as vanishing fog.

She drew her fingers across the chair rail in the nook, the nicks from her father's rocking chair runners clearly visible on the base board. The door frame going into the den still held her height measurements from ages one through eight.

Something squishy squeaked beneath her foot. A pink and yellow rubber mouse, the tail long ago chewed off, stared blankly up at her. Once Snickers was moved in, she'd feel more at home in the loft.

Gathering his things into a plastic grocery bag, she looked around for something else to take back with her. One of the boxes marked *Goodwill* hadn't been sealed yet. She rummaged through the paper-wrapped items, pulling off just enough wrapping to see what they were.

An award from work, her cordless phone, a jar candle. She put the award in a box marked for storage and crammed the candle in her purse. She reached into the box and pulled out another item and unwrapped it. Alrik's talisman.

The bird looked different than she remembered. Graceful and beautiful. Almost alive.

Rewrapping the carving, she put the candle in the bag with Snickers' stuff and the talisman in her purse.

Before heading into the city, she went to the Dollar Discount and bought a new litter box, litter, cat food and some treats.

Dexter opened the door for her when she got back to the apartment building.

"Quite an armful you've got there, Mrs. Volk. Care for some help?" He smiled as graciously as he had that morning and rang the elevator for her.

"No thanks, I've got it."

The doors opened and she got on, nodding goodbye. Did they really need to live in a building with a doorman? He was a nice guy, but she could push the elevator button herself.

The light on the answering machine blinked. Three messages. The buttons had symbols instead of words. Very European. It took her a minute to determine which one meant play.

A message from the groomer. Snickers was ready. Wonderful! She jotted down the number so she could call for directions.

Next was Jeana inviting her to lunch the next day at their usual spot. Their usual spot. They must still be friends which meant Jeana hadn't slept with Brad. Calleigh determined to do her best to forgive and forget. If Brad got a second chance, so should Jeana. She was family. And besides, that awful night had never happened.

Finally, Brad confirmed he would be late and not to hold dinner. Which was good, considering she didn't have a clue what she'd be fixing.

When she got back with Snickers, she fixed his litter box and set out bowls for food and water. He walked around sniffing and inspecting.

"I know, Snickems. It's not exactly home, is it? It will be…we just have to get used to it. And add a few things."

Snickers meowed plaintively.

"And buy a scratching post. Good idea." She ruffled his fur on her way to the bedroom.

Where to put the carving? The nightstand drawer was too shallow. Some further investigation revealed a dresser drawer full of bras and panties. The talisman was *not* going in there. She settled on the bottom shelf of the nightstand, atop a stack of art books.

She ate a bowl of cereal for dinner, watched a little TV, then decided on a hot bath. She lit the candle she'd brought back and set it on the bathroom counter. The spacious tub looked out over the city through a bank of windows. As the sky darkened, the lights twinkled brighter. The city glittered like an antique brooch, tarnished but still beautiful.

The bath water cooled, but still she sat there. *Tomorrow will be a better day.* A shiver ran through her. Time to get out, the water was sucking the heat out of her.

Brad came home so late, she barely registered his arrival. She heard him shower, felt the bed move when he got in, mumbled a response to his good night.

If she had dreams, she didn't remember them when she woke. Filling the coffee pot while Brad got ready, she wondered what lunch with Jeana would be like.

Snickers meowed to be fed just as Brad called her name. She dumped a can of food into the cat's dish and went back to the bedroom.

"Sorry I got home so late. Is everything taken care of at the brownstone?"

She ignored the question and sat on the bed cross-legged, her drawstring pants pooching out around her middle.

He glanced at her. "Do you have to wear those? They look like old man pajamas."

She tugged her faded tee over her waistline. "They're comfortable."

"They're ugly. Now what about the brownstone? Is it ready?"

"About that, I still don't understand why we're selling it."

Knotting his tie, eyes on the mirror, he answered without looking at her. "I've explained my plan to invest the money numerous times. Trust me on this, Cal, I know what's best."

"I guess so." He did deal with lots of money every day at the estate attorneys.

"What's your plan for the day?" He adjusted his collar.

"My plan? Um, lunch with Jeana…I don't know what else… maybe pick up a few things for the apartment."

"A few things? Like what?"

"I don't know, candles, a few plants, stuff like that."

"Candles leave soot on the walls, you know I don't like that." He smoothed his hair before donning his suit jacket.

"Don't I live here, too? I like candles."

"Let's not argue, kitten. I think I may have a job for you. Landers, Jerritt & Smyth are going to need a junior account exec and Smyth owes me a favor. He's willing to give you an interview."

She sat silently, not sure what to say. Junior account executive was a good position but the job sounded about as exciting as reading the phone book.

"Don't I get a thank you?" Brad raised a single brow expectantly.

"Sorry, thanks." She smiled halfheartedly. "I'm sure it's a great job."

"Cal, you've got to get a career sometime. I know it's a bottom rung position but they're willing to give you on the job training."

"Fabulous." She wrapped the pants' drawstring around her finger.

If he picked up on her sarcasm, he didn't show it. "Gotta go. Have a good lunch with Jeana." He brushed an invisible piece of lint off his shoulder.

"Are you going to be late again?"

"Until I put this deal to bed, you can probably count on me being late every night."

"Oh." So much for life as a newlywed.

"Don't look so down. You'll forget all about these late nights when we're dining by candlelight in Paris."

"Paris?" She looked up.

"For our honeymoon." He smiled.

"Oh! Paris! That sounds wonderful." She jumped off the bed and hugged him.

"I thought you'd like that." He kissed her again, this time on the mouth. His hands traveled lower, cupping her backside. He squeezed. "Don't forget to hit the gym. Now, walk me out."

Sighing, she followed him to the elevator. Apparently, somewhere, there was a treadmill missing her.

"Drop my charcoal pinstripe off at the cleaners, would you? And book a table for four at Park Avenue Cafe for next weekend. Give the maitre'd my name. My parents are coming into town and I want to take them somewhere nice."

"What about Patois?"

He shook his head. "You know how my mother feels about venturing into the wilds of Brooklyn."

The elevator doors opened. He got on and winked at her. "*Au revoir, mon amour*."

"Bye." She smiled. Paris. They had talked about going to Paris for their honeymoon, but to actually go! Thoughts of walking hand in hand on the Champs Elysee, drinking wine at a sidewalk bistro and making love in some historic old hotel under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower swirled through her head.

Maybe she would go to the gym. What could it hurt to get her dance figure back? Brad loved her. He was taking her to Paris.

She called the doorman and found out the building had a fitness

center. An hour later, she returned to the apartment, sweaty and ready for a shower. She definitely preferred dancing to working out in some boring fitness center. Paris had better be worth it.

After a shower, she faced her mostly new wardrobe, wondering what outfit to wear to lunch. Jeana was a true fashionista, always pushing her to buy more interesting clothes. Sometimes, it was hard to believe they were related.

Many of the pieces on Calleigh's side of the walk-in still had their tags. Her brows shot up when she looked at the prices. Was a designer wardrobe part of the Phoenix deal? On impulse, she grabbed one of her familiar Christian Dior boots. The soles were well worn. Apparently in this life she went out more.

She chose a Calvin Klein suit in a color the tag labeled "Pink Foil", a simple white blouse, and a pair of Jimmy Choo ankle boots. Jeana would freak when she saw this getup.

A final brush of her hair, a kiss for Snickers and she was out the door. Taking the #4 train down to 59th, she walked into Aureole in under twenty minutes.

Massive arrangements of delicately scented lilies and bright ginger blossoms flanked the interior doors. Their perfume mingled with the savory aroma of food, making Calleigh's mouth water. Soothing piano music played in the background. It seemed like ages since she'd been here.

The maitre'd escorted her to the table where Jeana sat chatting on her cell phone. She wiggled her fingers at Calleigh then held one up to indicate she'd just be a moment more. Her blonde shag shivered around her shoulders as she nodded and laughed at something the person on the other end said. Dressed in a beautiful winter white suit and ivory crocodile pumps, Jeana looked like Ice Princess Barbie. Boobs and all.

She clicked her phone shut and stood to give Calleigh a hug and an air kiss. "Hi, how are you, married lady?"

A slightly sweet and darkly spicy scent tickled Calleigh's nose as she returned the hug. "Good, thanks. You smell nice. What is that?"

"Carmen Marc Valvo's new scent, *Jolie*. It's not available for another month. We got a sample in the press kit yesterday. Isn't it grand?" Jeana was the style editor at *Couture*, the reigning women's fashion magazine.

"Very nice. So?" Calleigh did her best seated model pose.

"So…what?" Jeana's brows lifted but her botoxed forehead stayed smooth.

"What do you think of my suit?"

"The same thing I did when I helped you pick it out. It's fabulous. Are those the Jimmy's we bought at Saks? Your uncle would be proud.

Speaking of whom…" She paused and took a sip of white wine.

A waiter stopped by and greeted them, handing them menus and telling them about the chef's choice. When he left, Jeana continued.

"Have you seen the photos he shot for that new European underwear line, Uber Homme? That campaign could single-handedly revive the tightie-whitie. I will meet that model, with or without Seamus's help."

Calleigh laughed. This might be a different life, but Jeana sure hadn't changed. "I'll see if I can get you a phone number. Although you know he's probably gay."

"I could straighten him out. In every sense of the word," Jeana purred.

"I guess I don't need to ask how your love life is, then," Calleigh said.

Something she couldn't name flickered briefly in Jeana's eyes. Her cousin looked away, concentrating on the menu. Was Jeana jealous? That would be a first.

"You know me, too busy for anything serious."

"But you must be dating someone, you're one of the most eligible bachelorettes in Manhattan."

"Not a soul." Jeana waved her hand and a sparkle caught her eye. Calleigh grabbed her friend's wrist for a better look. A diamond bracelet glittered back at her.

"Wow. That's beautiful. Where did you get that? I can't even imagine how much a thing like that costs."

"It's nothing. Just CZs." She slipped her hand out of Calleigh's and back to her lap.

"You don't wear CZs." Calleigh smirked. Diamonds really were this girl's best friend.

Jeana shrugged. "Before I forget, have I told you how great your hair looks? You can thank me for that, you know." She flipped open her menu. "Brad couldn't come up with what to get you for a wedding present, so I suggested it. Very expensive, but money is no object where you're concerned."

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy?" Calleigh joked.

Jeana's gaze snapped up from the menu. "What? No. Not at all. Hey, I introduced you two. I could have kept him for myself."

"I'm just teasing. Why so tense?" She picked up her own menu. The prices were almost as shocking as the tags in her closet.

"Sorry. Lots of stuff going on at work." She sighed. "Maybe I am a little jealous. Brad's a great guy. Can you blame me? No one's whisking me off to Paris."

"How did you know we're going to Paris? I just found out this morning." Calleigh set her menu down.

Jeana's face paled to the shade of her suit. She sipped her wine and the color returned to her cheeks. "He called me, to be sure that would be just the right honeymoon. He's so concerned with making sure everything's perfect." She laughed weakly. "What girl wouldn't be a smidge jealous of a man like that?"

Calleigh nodded. "That was sweet of him."

The waiter returned and they ordered. Jeana talked about every designer who'd ever held a sketchbook, and Calleigh just listened, as disconnected from the conversation as an audience member at a talk show taping.

When the check came, Jeana insisted on paying. They hugged goodbye, with promises to do it again soon.

The day had warmed considerably. The sun was shining and the sky blue. With no real direction in mind, Calleigh walked, enjoying the fresh air.

She replayed everything Jeana had said about Brad. He was a good catch. He loved her, wanted her to be happy. Wanted the best for her. Still, something bothered her, something nameless and small. A piece of the puzzle was missing. She'd gotten what she wanted, but she wasn't happy. Correction, she wasn't as happy as she thought she'd be. So they were selling her childhood home. All the memories she needed were in her head. Brad was always telling her she was too sentimental. Selling the brownstone was the right thing to do.

Her pep talk took her as far as Times Square. She thought about getting a pretzel but then decided against the carbs. She wandered aimlessly, watching the tourists buy "I Love NY" T-shirts and Statue of Liberty thermometers. A gaggle of teenage girls stood nearby, lining up to have their picture taken.

One of them approached Calleigh. "Excuse me, ma'am? Would you take our picture?"

Ma'am? "Sure. Which button do I push?"

"The silver one on top. Be sure to get that billboard in the background." The girls giggled as their ringleader pointed over their heads.

Calleigh glanced up to see what the girl was talking about.

The massive billboard depicted a well-muscled male in tight, white, ribbed underwear and nothing else. From behind, a woman's arms wrapped around him, one hand on his chest, the index finger of the other disappearing beneath the waistband of his underwear. Across the bottom of the black and white photo the words Uber Homme were scrawled in lipstick red.

There was something familiar about the man in the picture. His face was turned and hidden by shoulder length hair but the chest…

"Oh my." Alrik. The scars had been airbrushed out, but she'd bet

her Jimmy Choos that was him. The heat in her belly warred with the chill on her skin.

"Lady, are you going to take our picture or drool?" The girls giggled again, poking each other and making faces.

"Yes. Sorry." She snapped the shot and handed the camera back.

The missing puzzle piece clicked as it snapped into place. She stared at the billboard, refusing to acknowledge the sound. She dug through her purse for her cell phone, found it and punched in her uncle's speed dial number.

She listened as the line connected and started to ring. Seamus better have some answers and they better be good ones.

Chapter Eight

"Hullo?"

"Uncle Seamus, it's Calleigh."

"Calleigh, me love! What can I do for you?"

"Who's the guy in the Uber Homme photo? What's his name?"

"Interesting question for a newly wedded lass to be askin', don't you think?" Seamus chuckled.

She huffed into the phone. "Answer the bloody question. I'm in no mood for games."

"Calleigh McCarthy! I'd say you're in a mood all right. Is that anyway to talk to your uncle?"

"No, it isn't. Answer the question."

Silence.

She rolled her eyes. Creative people could be so dramatic. "Please."

"His name is Paulo."

"Paulo?" Not Alrik?

"Lovely Italian chap, hardly speaks a lick of English."

"Italian?"

"Yes, lovey. Anything else? His measurements, perhaps?" More chuckling.

"No, I…Jeana wanted to know. Thanks. Bye." She hung up and looked at the billboard again. Upon further inspection, she decided the nose wasn't quite right, the hair a little too short. Paulo. She owed someone a pair of Jimmy Choos.

Chiding herself for having such a fickle heart, she hailed a cab. Times Square was too noisy, too crowded, and her feet hurt from walking in these stupid heels.

Alrik wasn't even real. He was a twelve-hundred-year-old Viking who was dead but not really, and who had burned into a pile of ashes in front of her. It was like having a crush of the tooth fairy. Except without the cash incentive.

Saints in heaven! Is that what she had? A crush? *Snap out of it, Cal. You're too old to have a crush. You're a married woman, for Pete's sake! Start acting like it.*

Brad was real. He was handsome. Not as handsome as—*Stop it!* He had a great job. He loved her. He was taking her to Paris. She stared at the ring on her finger. He only wanted the best for her. Even Jeana said so. Although that girl's opinion was questionable.

By the time Calleigh got back to the apartment building, she had formed a plan. Dexter directed her to a market a few blocks away and after a quick trip there, she returned home.

The next few hours were spent prepping and chopping, boiling and baking. She whipped up a seafood lasagna, a salad of baby greens with homemade vinaigrette and shaved parmigiana cheese, then wrapped a warm loaf of zesty garlic-pesto bread in foil. She packed all of it into a cardboard box with plates, silverware and a bottle of Chianti.

Tonight she would treat her hard-working husband to a wonderful picnic dinner, and an even better dessert.

Over a La Perla set of black lace push-up bra and panties, she tied a black wrap dress. The dress's deep vee neckline accentuated the cleavage created by the bra. She slipped her feet into a pair of strappy black heels. Her feet might get cold, but Brad could warm them up.

She did her makeup carefully, finishing with deep red lipstick. A touch of Chanel No. 5 and some diamond stud earrings, and she was ready to give her husband a reason to stop working.

Her husband. She smiled. The poor man. She could picture him sitting at his desk, hunched over legal documents, files piled up around him. He probably hadn't even thought of food. Hopefully once he saw her, food would still be the furthest thing on his mind.

She giggled, feeling naughty and wonderful all at the same time. In this new reality they'd undoubtedly made love already as husband and wife. But for her, tonight would be the first time. Her nerves tingled and the anticipatory rush spilled across her skin warm and inviting. This was right. This was what her life should be.

Dexter called a car to take her to Brad's office building and then loaded the box of goodies into the trunk for her when it came.

She sat in the back of the sedan wrapped in a long black cashmere coat with mink collar and cuffs. The sedan was as quiet as a vault. The city flickered by like a silent movie.

Mesmerized by the lights outside her window and the thoughts whirling in her head, she scarcely noticed when the car stopped.

The glass partition whirred down. The driver glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "We're here, ma'am. Would you like me to carry the box up for you?"

"No, thank you, I can manage."

He came around to open her door, and she tipped him as she got out. Lifting the box into her arms, he thanked her, wishing her a good night.

After a brief explanation and a little pleading, Calleigh persuaded the security guard at the front desk to let her up. She'd been to Brad's office numerous times, but never after dark, when everyone else had gone home.

The empty offices reminded her of staying late after school. She passed a night shift cleaner vacuuming in the hallway. What a tough

way to make a living.

Brad's office was just ahead. She smiled at her ingenuity. He was going to be so surprised.

Balancing on one foot, she rested the box on her knee. The cleaner vacuumed closer. The machine's high-pitched hum was not exactly the background music Calleigh had envisioned, but she couldn't very well ask the woman to stop working.

She pushed the lever handle down and hefted the box back into her arms. Nudging the door open with her hip, she slipped inside. The door shut softly behind her.

The office was dark, only the desk lamp illuminated the space. She blinked, letting her eyes adjust. Brad's big leather desk chair faced the windows looking over the city. The coat rack beside the door held his suit jacket and another one in winter white.

Soft moaning drifted above the vacuum's fading hum. A spicy sweet scent perfumed the air. Her stomach pitched and the urge to retch overwhelmed her. *Not again. Not this time.*

"Brad?" His name came out a whispered plea. The phantom hand of comprehension squeezed the air from her lungs.

The chair shook a little but didn't swivel. She heard frantic murmurs and the thump of something or someone hitting the floor.

Calleigh's hands shook. The box slipped out of her grasp and landed with a sharp crack.

"Honey, is that you? What are you doing here?" Brad's voice quavered. More scuffling. The rasp of a zipper.

She reached over and flipped the light switch.

Blinking at the sudden brightness, she saw a deep red stain blossoming around the box as Chianti seeped into the carpet. Anger surged through her, steel-coating her spine. What a fool she was to think he would change. That he'd be different this time.

Well, one of them would be. She wouldn't run away this time.

"Brad. *Now*." She stalked toward his desk just as he stood. The first three buttons on his shirt were undone. His belt was unbuckled but his fly was up.

He moved, blocking her view of the desk behind him. "Kitten! Nice to—"

"Cut the crap, I know what's going on. I will not be made a fool of twice."

"Twice? I don't know what you're talking about. You need to calm down, Cal. It isn't what it looks like."

Anger surged through her, earthy and acidic like the spilled Chianti. She opened herself up to it and let her emotions take over. With new clarity, she saw him for what he really was. A slimy, cheating crapweasel. She smiled. "Really? So you aren't screwing

Jeana?"

"Jeana? What makes you think Jeana's here?"

"Her jacket's hanging on your coat rack and her perfume is stinking up the place. Your office smells like a whorehouse. I know she's here."

"You're being silly. There's no one here but me. That's my secretary's coat and her perfume. She just left a half hour ago." He started buttoning his shirt.

"So were you screwing your secretary? Because by the looks of you, you've been screwing someone." Calleigh poked him in the chest. "And it certainly," *poke* "isn't" *poke* "me."

His face contorted in anger. He grabbed her hand. "Enough. I have work to do. Go home, Calleigh."

"I will *not* be dismissed, Bradley." Scowling back, she pulled her hand back and charged past, elbowing him out of her way.

Jeana cowered under his desk dressed only in panties, crocodile pumps and a familiar diamond bracelet.

Furious, Calleigh grabbed a handful of platinum hair and yanked her out.

"Ow!" Jeana twitched away, spitting like a cat. "Get off me! Brad forced me—"

Calleigh released her. "Shut up. I may be a fool, but you're a slut. And I'm getting wiser by the minute, *cousin*."

She turned her attention back to her husband. "We're done, Brad. Over. Speak to me through my lawyer."

He stood there slack jawed as she headed for the door. She grabbed Jeana's jacket off the coat rack and threw it at her ex-cousin.

"Cover up, Jeana. That much silicone on anyone is obscene."

* * *

Alrik watched the scene unfold in Freya's golden mirror. The happy sounds of Valhalla's souls echoed through the halls, but bitterness filled him. This one who had betrayed Calleigh with her cur of a husband, this Jeana, reminded him of another cold-hearted blonde.

Calleigh should not have to suffer this. She did not deserve to have her heart so cruelly broken. He was proud of her courage. Proud of her for standing up for herself. She was a strong woman, brave, beautiful, and pure-hearted.

He would slip away before Freya noticed and return to Calleigh before the three days ran its course. Surely she would not choose to keep this change. He could be back at her side before another grain of

sand slipped through her hourglass.

"Viking!" Freya's voice rang through the gilded halls like a mother calling her child. She wanted him at her side. Nay, she demanded him there.

He stayed silent.

She called again, a sullen insistence edging her voice.

He growled low in his throat. The days spent fending off the goddess's advances taxed his patience, something he did not have in abundance to begin with. She was considered a great beauty and her skills as a lover were storied by Valhalla's minstrels, but Alrik refused to pay the price for sampling her wares.

His Phoenix brother, Eros, knew that cost too well. Succumbing to Freya's wiles had bound him to her for eternity. There would be no second chance for the first Phoenix created.

Muffled footsteps whispered across the floor behind him. The densely fragrant scent of attar of roses curled its way through the air. He knew the goddess stood waiting before he even turned around.

"My lady."

Flanked by her two great blue tigers, Freya was draped in sheer gold silk. The fabric matched her unbound hair and displayed more of her body than it covered. "Do not make me fetch you like a servant," she sniffed.

"Many Vikings walk these hallowed halls, goddess. Perhaps if you called me by name I would know which of us you wanted." After seeing what Calleigh had just been through, his mood was sour and his tolerance for Freya's games thin as the silk she wore.

"Your insolence is hardly amusing, Viking." Indigo flashes of lust glinted in her eyes. The hunt aroused her, that much was plain.

"I did not mean to be amusing. I meant to be instructive." He glanced at the mirror, wondering what was happening to his charge.

"Ignore the mortal! You will be returned to her soon enough." With a sweep of her hand, Freya clouded the glass, blocking his view.

Fresh anger ground his teeth together. He could feel the muscles twitching along his jaw. "This moment would not be soon enough."

She shook her head, a wicked smile teasing her lush lips. "I could find such better uses for that bold mouth of yours. Perhaps you should be taught a lesson."

"I know everything I need to know."

"Do you? How intriguing." She laughed, twirling a blonde curl around one finger. "You have one day left in my presence. You shall spend it in my bedchamber starting immediately. We shall see just how strong your resolve is, Viking."

Chapter Nine

Trembling, Calleigh slammed the office door behind her. This wasn't the way things were supposed to go. This wasn't what she wanted.

She hurried down to the lobby, rushed out of the building and hailed a taxi. By the time she'd gotten back to the apartment, the rush of adrenaline had worn off. This wasn't even close to what she wanted.

She grabbed the talisman and shook it. "Come back. I don't want this. I've changed my mind."

Nothing. She shook it again. "Please." She clicked her heels together and wished for home.

The apartment remained empty. Her heart sank. She'd have to live out the three days.

Tears blurred her vision as she put Snickers in his carrier. Stuffing the talisman into her purse, she looked around for anything else. There was so little here that mattered.

Her cell phone rang. Brad's number flashed on the display. She powered the phone off.

In no mood to bother with the subways, she had the doorman call her another car and driver. It was going on Brad's bill anyway.

Forty-five minutes later, she was standing in her Brooklyn home. Robotically, she dug through boxes to find a lamp, got Snickers situated, and then collapsed onto the sheet covered couch.

The chill in the house registered after her toes went numb. She nudged the heat up, then saw the key for the fireplace still on the mantle, overlooked in the packing.

By firelight, the towers of boxes cast long, lonely shadows. Exhausted but running on nerves, she rummaged through boxes. She discovered a garbage bag full of her clothes in one of the Goodwill piles.

Jeans, sweatshirts, old sweaters, simple bras, cotton panties, everything Brad found unacceptable. She shed her black dress and matching lingerie for a pair of flannel lounge pants and an old sweatshirt. She dug further and found some socks. Both her toes and the brownstone started to warm up.

She uncovered the couch and made a bed for herself with a throw pillow and an afghan. Snickers curled up beside her, purring.

"You love mama, don't you?" She scratched under his chin. "Not like that cheating idiot." She sighed. "Maybe I'm the idiot. I knew what Brad was about and I ignored it. A man just isn't worth all that. If he doesn't love me for me, I don't want him." She was talking to

herself now, staring into the fire.

"I will never again compromise my life for love." She yawned and Snickers rolled over, paws in the air. Kissing his little pink nose, she drifted, her lids heavy.

"Never again…"

Bright sun washed the room with a golden glow, waking Calleigh from a fitful night's sleep. Her neck was stiff from her position on the couch, her body sore from her time in the gym the day before. She stretched slowly, yawning and wishing she knew where the aspirin was.

So much to do. Where to start? What to do first?

She needed advice, and there was only one person she could think of who would give it to her without making her feel worse than she already did.

Powering up her cell phone, she saw three voicemails, all from Brad. They could wait. She hit the number for her uncle's speed dial.

"Hmmhullo?"

She'd definitely woken him up. "Uncle Seamus? It's Calleigh. I need some help."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She bit her lip, desperate not to cry, not to seem like a helpless child, even though she felt like one.

"Calleigh, love, what's wrong? Are you weepin'?"

Deep inhale. "Brad cheated on me. I don't know what to do."

"Oh pet, I'm so sorry. Are you sure?"

"Positive. I walked in on him. With Jeana. *Jeana*! I need a lawyer, I think. Uncle Seamus, I'm such a fool." Fresh tears wet her face.

"Jeana? Merciful Joseph, is there anyone left in this city that girl hasn't tupped? What a lousy thing to do to family.

"Calm down, love, we'll get through this. First, get to the bank and close the joint accounts. Take whatever money's there and start a new account in your own name. I'll call my attorney friend and get him to recommend a good divorce lawyer. Then I'll come to you… where are you?"

"I'm at home."

"Okay, I've got a key. I'll let myself in if you're not back from the bank yet when I get there."

"Could you do one more thing for me?" Calleigh asked.

"Just name it."

"Bring some aspirin?"

"You got it, lovey."

"Thank you, Uncle Seamus.

"Lovey, I'd wring the wanker's neck with me own hands if I thought it would help."

She got to Citibank just as they opened. The teller slid the safety window back.

"May I help you?"

Calleigh pushed a piece of paper with the account numbers written on it under the slot. "I'd like to close these accounts, then open a new one in my name alone."

"Yes ma'am. I can close the accounts for you, but you'll have to see an account manager to open a new one."

The teller punched the numbers into her computer. "Would you like this in large or small bills?"

"Large, I guess. It's just going right back in."

The woman counted out two crisp one hundred dollar bills, a five and three singles, then added two quarters and a penny.

Calleigh stared at the money. Her temples started to throb. Hard. "What is that?"

"That's the total of your accounts, ma'am."

Grabbing the counter for balance, Calleigh shook her head. "There was over $50,000 in those accounts."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. That's all that was in there. Would you like to see an account manager now?"

"No. That has to be a mistake. Can you check again?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Volk, but all the withdrawals were made by a signer on this account. There is no mistake."

Brad was the only other signer on the account. She took a deep shuddering breath. "Can you at least tell me where the money went? There has to be some record."

The woman gave her a sympathetic look. "Let me get a manager."

The bank manager supplied Calleigh with copies of every statement and put them in a manila envelope. She accepted them, mumbled a thank you and left.

She walked home numb. $50,000 of her inheritance, gone. What had Brad done with the money? For a brief moment, she was glad her parents weren't alive to see what a mess her life had become.

Numbness thawed to hurt, hurt boiled into anger. What did Brad need all that money for? He made a great salary. Had he used her money to buy those designer clothes? A down payment on that uptown loft? And where was the money from the sale of her mother's car?

She stopped walking and stood staring at the cracked sidewalk. He'd been planning on selling the brownstone. The thought of him getting his hands on that money sent a cold chill down her spine. What was he up to? Maybe the answer was in the bank statements.

Seamus hadn't arrived when she got home, so she sat on the couch and started going through the bank papers. She glanced

through the sheets of canceled checks. Most of them were made out to cash but the copy of the check card was a different story. It read like a credit card statement.

The first name that caught her attention was Tiffany's. She looked at the amount then looked at her ring. No way it had cost that little. Not that thirty-five hundred was a small amount. She wondered if Brad had given her something else, something she wouldn't have known about because of the change. But wouldn't she be wearing the gift? How could a girl resist showing off something new and sparkly?

Of course. She closed her eyes and slumped back on the couch. Jeana's bracelet. Gold-digging home wrecker.

After a moment, she shuffled through the papers again. She understood finances about as well as she understood men. Corrigan was the trustee of her parent's estate until she turned thirty when the whole thing came to her in its entirety.

Three more years and Brad would've gotten his hands on the whole lot. Nearly three million dollars in stocks and annuities, plus the brownstone, which was worth nearly a million. Another shot of ice ran through her veins.

A knock at the door made her jump. The blurred image of her uncle smiled through the beveled glass.

"Hi." She sniffed as she opened the door.

He handed her a bottle of aspirin. The simple kindness caused tears to spill.

"There, there ye poor wee lass." His brogue thick with emotion, he kissed her forehead and drew her into his arms.

She sobbed into his chest inhaling his familiar cologne. The comfort of his warm, loving arms soothed her.

"Cry it out, lass. That's it now. Let it all out."

Wiping her nose on her sleeve, she took a deep shuddering breath. "Come sit down. We need to talk."

"Did you get t'the bank?"

She sniffed and rattled the bottle of pills. "As soon as I take a few of these, I'll tell you all about it."

After two aspirin and a brief explanation, Calleigh turned over the bank statements. Seamus read, an occasional "hmph" his only response.

Finally, he looked up and shook his head. An uneasy frown weighed his mouth. "Not being able to keep his pecker in his pants is the least of Brad's problems. Most of these check card statements are payments to bookmakers and OTB. I have a feeling that's where a lot of the big cash withdrawals went too."

"How do you know that's what they are?"

He patted her knee. "Let's say there are parts of my past I'd rather

not discuss."

"Bookmakers? OTB? That's for betting, right?"

"Yes. OTB is Off Track Betting. You've seen those places in the city. A bookmaker is a guy who takes money for bets. Bad man to owe money to."

She disagreed with a shake of her head. "Brad wasn't a gambler."

He held the papers up. "These say otherwise."

Dropping her face into her hands, Calleigh sighed. How had she not known about this? Everything she knew about Brad was false.

"So, he married me for my money? Or Mom and Dad's money, I should say. I'm such an idiot."

Seamus hugged her against him. He smelled good, some expensive cologne, no doubt. "Yer not an idiot. Yer a poor sweet lass who fell for the wrong guy. We'll get you a bulldog of a lawyer and Brad will get his due."

She nodded silently.

"Maybe I should have Corri come and fetch you. You could spend the night with them," he said.

She pulled away. "No, I want to be here. In my home."

"Then maybe Aunt Moreen should come spend the night with you."

Smiling weakly at her uncle's concern, she worried a bare spot on the couch. "I really just want to be alone. I have a lot of thinking to do and plenty of unpacking to keep me busy. Besides, I don't want to explain everything to anyone else right now."

He kissed her forehead. "Understood. You call me if you need anything, promise?"

"Promise. Thank you. I love you." She hugged him.

"I love you, too, pet." He embraced her back, before standing and making his way to the door.

"Lock this door behind me, and keep it locked when you're here. And call me first thing in the morning when you get up."

"I will, I will. Thanks again, Uncle Seamus."

"Bye, lovey."

She locked the door as promised, watching him leave through one of the leaded glass diamonds. Her stomach rumbled but she had no appetite. The only thing she wanted was her life back in order.

Unpacking the house was a daunting task, but gave her something beside the thoughts in her head to focus on. Her heart ached even more than her overworked, abused muscles.

She got her bed frame put together and wrestled the box spring and mattress into place. Another night on the couch and she'd be in a neck brace.

The only sheets she could find needed washing and she had yet to

come across any detergent. Reluctantly, she changed into a pair of jeans and old sneakers for a trip to the corner store. Leaving the house didn't really appeal, but the fresh air couldn't hurt and the aspirin had taken the edge off the throbbing in her legs.

On the way back, she made a side trip to Thai'd Up. Sooner or later, she'd feel like eating, and when she did, pad thai would be just the thing.

Bags in one hand, she unlocked the door. Despite the hours spent unpacking, the house was still a shambles of boxes and packing paper. Rolled rugs leaned against other pieces of furniture still stacked and draped for storage. Days of emptying boxes and rearranging her belongings lay ahead.

She put her purchases away then started the washer. Snickers sat in front of the fire so she turned it on before wiring up the TV. The cable was disconnected, but she'd found her portable CD player earlier. She set it up in the bathroom and turned the faucet to fill the tub. Twisting her hair up into a knot on the way, she realized she had nothing to secure it with. She settled on the chopsticks from Thai'd Up but her newly-straight hair wasn't as easy to manage as her curls had been. After the third try, her hair stayed put. She went back to the living room to find something to play while she bathed.

A box marked CDs held just that. She pulled out an Alison Krauss album she hadn't listened to in a while. After rummaging for a few candles she'd spotted earlier, she grabbed a towel from the stack someone had been using as packing material.

Snickers left the hearth to take up his usual spot on the edge of the tub. He eyed the rising water level with his usual level of interest.

She dumped in half the box of Mr. Bubble she'd bought at the store. A glassy mound of foam swelled from beneath the rushing spigot.

She soaked in water hot enough to pinken her skin. The soothing music and flickering candles eased her sore muscles. The sandman whispered her name. Her eyelids drooped. But her weariness went beyond the boundaries of her body. She was tired of being heartsick.

From his spot on the bathmat, Snickers' head popped up, ears swiveling. He tensed, eyes wide.

"Don't tell me. Mouse alert?" Time to get out of the tub anyway. The sheets still needed to go in the dryer. Maybe she'd just sleep on the mattress.

Tail switching, Snickers crouched low and worked his shoulders up and down in an effort to get just the right purchase before launching his attack. The great striped predator stalking his prey. She grinned, shaking her head at his antics.

Just as abruptly as it had begun, the hunt was forgotten. Snickers

sat up, chirped then trotted out the door.

She dried off before wrapping herself in the towel then unplugged the tub and followed after Snickers, muttering to herself. “Must be nice. Eat, sleep, play. No bills, no worries. I wish I could have a cat’s life.”

“I can arrange that.”

Calleigh screamed, clutching her towel. The voice was familiar but it registered too late.

Scratching Snickers under the chin, Alrik crouched amongst the boxes in the living room. He wore the same outfit he’d been in when she’d watched him disappear into flames. Glazed in the light of the glowing fire, he looked more myth than man.

“You came back.” She stomped down the whoosh of pleasure in her belly.

He patted Snickers on the head and unfolded to a standing position. “I told you I would, fair eyes. Today is the end of the third day. You must decide to keep this change or go back to your life as it was.”

With everything that had happened, that detail had slipped her mind. The idea that she might want to keep her life this way struck her as ludicrous. “Keep this change? Are you serious? This life sucks! He married me for my money and he’s screwing my best friend. Ex-best friend. I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen again. Do you have any idea what it feels like to be so…so…betrayed?”

Alrik’s eyes went a deeper shade of blue. “Aye, I do. And I am sorry your change went as it did.”

Sorry? It was all his fault this had happened to her. Well, it wasn’t all his fault, but she felt like being mad at someone besides herself. Miffed, she snapped back. “You do what? Know what it’s like to be betrayed? Know what it’s like to have your heart broken? Somehow I doubt a man like you really understands that. Just get me back to my regularly miserable life, please.”

He yanked the ivory sweater over his head and tossed it to the ground. With his fist he pounded the scar over his heart. “I know betrayal. I know the pain of a lover’s blade plunging into my chest. I know the sound of her laughter as my life’s blood puddled at my feet.” His voice dropped to a rasp. “But that was naught compared to watching my family’s slaughter.”

She pulled the towel a little tighter. “I didn’t know,” she whispered.

He dropped his gaze to the floor and pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead. “Forgive me.” He raked his hand through his hair. “It is not your place to bear my burden. I am sorry.”

He held out a hand. “Come, I will erase this change.”

“I’m okay here.” His words made her troubles seem so small. She wanted to soothe him but she didn’t begin to know how.

“You must come through the flames with me this time.”

Flames? “I don’t want to.”

“There is no other way.” He picked his sweater off the floor and shrugged it back on. “It will not hurt. I promise.”

She took a step forward. “I’m not dressed.”

“That matters not.” He reached out to her again. “I will not let you be hurt. I have promised that already.”

The kiss. He’d promised when he’d kissed her. Pricked by the memory, she dipped her head. She didn’t want to look at him. Didn’t want to be reminded of how wonderful it felt to be held in those strong arms or the spicy sweet taste of him. He was just a fantasy and the thought tortured her now that she knew she’d never have a man like him in real life.

“Calleigh lass, the time to return grows short. You must come now or this change will remain. Do you want that?” His voice was reassuring but firm.

“No.” She shook her head. She definitely did not want that. “What do I have to do?”

Wings of fire unfurled behind him as he opened his arms to her. “Come to me.”

She stepped into his arms. Mercy, he smelled good. Up close, the feathers of flame gave off a soft, pulsing heat. “You promise this isn’t going to burn me?”

His wings began closing around her. He smoothed a stray hair back over her ear. “Aye, you have my word. We must go.”

Gazing into his eyes, she believed him. “Okay. I’m ready.”

The wings covered them completely, but did not touch her. All she could see was Alrik, awash in the orange-red glow of the fire. Gusts of heat whirled around them, swirling up from their feet. A rushing sound filled her ears. There was a sudden sense of movement. She gasped and put her hands against his chest to brace herself.

Even through the weave of his sweater, she could feel his skin burning under her fingertips. He smiled softly, dancing flames reflected in his eyes. “Do not be afraid, fair eyes.”

The fire surged, brightening. Something liquid rose over her bare feet and up past her ankles. She looked down. Flames engulfed her calves and licked up toward her knees.

Chapter Ten

Calleigh shuddered with fear and twisted away. “I can’t do this.”

“You can. You are a strong woman.” Alrik wrapped his arms around her and snugged her against him. “Hold on to me.”

Closing her eyes, she buried her face into his chest. Fear iced her veins as the liquid heat spiraled higher and covered her whole body. She inhaled and held on tighter. Then darkness settled over her shut lids. A chill tickled her skin.

“All is as it was,” he said without letting go.

She opened her eyes and glanced around. The fire was gone. So were the stacked boxes. Everything was just as it had been the night of her uncle’s birthday party. Her coat still lay across the couch.

She made no move to break free of Alrik’s embrace. In her three days as Mrs. Volk, Brad had never held her this tenderly. Alrik’s warmth felt good, now that the swirling flames had disappeared. So what if he was a fantasy, he was still better than anything going on in her real life.

He tipped her face up to his with a finger beneath her chin. “I promised I would not hurt you.”

The aroma of cinnamon made her smile. She lost herself for a moment in his blue eyes. Oh my, he was beautiful. “You kept your promise very well. Is it really Sunday night again?”

“Aye. And you never answered my question.”

“What question?” She wrinkled her brow, trying to recall.

“I asked to be rewarded for behaving myself at your family’s house.” He grinned with a little boy’s pride. Her stomach quivered like she’d drunk a cup of bees. Why couldn’t he be real?

“So you did.” She swallowed. “I take it I’m not married anymore?”

“Nay.” He shook his head, his smile just as bright.

“And I have my inheritance back?”

“All is as it was.”

Relief surged through her along with the need to celebrate. But what she wanted wasn’t a party. Grabbing hold of the same courage she’d used to face Brad’s infidelity, she laced her fingers into Alrik’s dark-gold locks and pulled his face to hers.

Then she kissed him like she’d been wanting to. Long and hard. Slow and deep. With meaning.

Without hesitation, he kissed back, crushing her against his decadently muscled body. As wonderful as being wrapped in his strong arms felt, nothing compared to the paradise of kissing him. He tasted like gingersnaps with hot cocoa; warm and sweet and spicy. She

wanted more.

Unlike the first time they'd kissed, Calleigh felt free. The bonds Brad once had around her heart fell away completely. He faded to the recesses of her memory while Alrik moved to the forefront. She wanted to be held and kissed by this fantasy man even though she knew he wouldn't be around for long. She just needed to feel wanted. Desired. Beautiful.

His fingers splayed against the small of her back. A low moan vibrated from his throat, teasing her lips. With his other hand, he loosed the chopsticks from her hair.

Curls tickled her cheeks. Calleigh pulled back. "My hair! It's curly again!"

He didn't let her far out of his embrace. "Aye. Your curls become you." He twisted a single curl around his finger.

"Really? You like it this way?"

"Very much." He caught a few more of her curls, held them to his nose and inhaled. "I love the scent of your hair."

"Thanks." Wow. He kissed like a rock star, and he liked the wild mess of curls she'd been born with. Heat traveled upwards from her toes. She glanced down. The towel was gone and her party outfit was back. "I should probably change."

"You said you would make hot chocolate." His hands settled on her hips like that was where he usually put them. Fine with her.

"Good memory." How great would it be to kiss him after he'd had hot chocolate? "I'll make us some, just as soon as I change."

Several minutes later, Alrik leaned against the countertop, watching her stir a pot of the promised hot chocolate. She wore soft plaid pants and a T-shirt that did nothing to hide the tempting sway of her unfettered breasts. He shifted and looked elsewhere but the roundness of her backside only aggravated the tightening of his groin. He concentrated on her lush lips instead.

She had kissed him. Bold and determined, she had taken his mouth without asking. The thrill of knowing she desired him throbbed in his belly. He shifted again out of necessity.

She adjusted something on the stove before turning to look at him. "So explain this to me. Everything that happened during those three days now *didn't* happen?"

He quickly clasped his hands in front of his groin. "Aye. You are the only mortal who will remember what occurred on those days."

She turned back to the stove and gave the pot one more stir.

The delicious smell of the chocolate made his mouth water. Or perhaps it was the curve of her bottom. Or the taste of her that lingered on his lips. He would have more of her, Freya be damned.

Calleigh took two mugs and a saucer from one of the cabinets. Into the dish she poured a little milk, then set it on the floor.

Snickers left his spot by Alrik's feet and scampered to the saucer chirping.

"Cats like milk." That much he knew.

"Yes, they do, but it's a rare treat." She bent to pet the cat. "It's not really good for his tummy to have it all the time."

Rumpling the fur on the cat's head, she looked up. "Does Snickers remember what happened?"

"I do not think so."

"I hope not." She stood, ladled the hot chocolate into the mugs and handed him one, her face serious. "Where were you during all of this?"

He leaned back against the counter, mulling his response.

"I mean, did you have any idea what was happening?" She tapped a nail against her mug. *Tink*, *tink*, *tink*.

Again, he hesitated, aware of how the wrong answer might upset her.

She waited, watching him while she sipped her drink.

"I was in Valhalla." He studied the dark liquid in his mug. "I knew some of what was happening—"

"Then why didn't you come back sooner? It wasn't exactly a fun experience." Her down-turned mouth and troubled eyes wounded him. She must think he had stayed away on purpose. He swallowed the mouthful of hot chocolate he had just drunk.

"I could not return any sooner than I did." Inwardly, he cursed Freya. After demanding he share her bed, the goddess had striped him bare as further punishment. Despite her powerful attempts to seduce him into taking her, he had not touched her. In fact, the only pleasure he had received was seeing Freya's fury at his lack of response. Thinking of Dagny had kept his body flaccid.

She took another sip before responding. "Is that some Phoenix rule? Do you have to stay away for all three days?"

"It is customary but not a rule."

A curve of chocolate curled from the corner of her lips. Her pink tongue darted out to lick the smudge away and he cursed his inability to do it for her. He wanted to taste her again. Soon.

"Do you have to leave?" The look in her gold-flecked eyes warmed him more than the hot drink.

"I am not going anywhere. I will be here until your three changes are made."

"I mean when I make the next change. Can't you stay with me?"

No one had ever asked that of him before. "You want me to stay?"

“Yes.” She nodded. “Please.”

Freya would be sorely displeased. He could barely contain his pleasure at the thought. Smiling broadly, he nodded. “I think I could, if you demanded it of me.”

The words gave him pause. Never had he revealed to any of his charges the power they held over him. But Calleigh was unlike any of the charges he had been assigned to before. “I…I must do as my charge wishes.”

“Is that why you made me ask for…” She blushed, the color of late summer roses staining her cheeks.

He took the mug from her hand and set it on the counter behind him before pulling her close. “Are the words so hard?”

She spread her fingers on his chest and stared at her hands. “You know what I was going to say.”

Her touch lit small fires on his skin. “But I want to hear you say it. Please.”

Quietly and without looking at him, she asked again. “Is that why you made me ask for a kiss?”

“Aye. I am bound not to interfere.”

“And a kiss is interfering?” She canted her head up, finally meeting his gaze.

A more beautiful face, he could not imagine. “To the goddess, it is.”

“I know you work for her, but it doesn’t seem like you really like her.”

He frowned. Without lying, there was no good way to respond.

She laughed softly. “It’s okay, you don’t have to like her just because she’s your boss. I know all about that. I don’t like my boss either. That’s why I’m quitting on Monday, after I report him to his superiors.”

“What happened?”

Frowning, she answered. “He put his hand on my butt.”

Alrik snorted in disgust. “Freya is no better.”

Laughter filled his ears.

“You mean the goddess has the hots for you? And you’re complaining about it? Since when does a man not jump at the chance to get—”

“I am not some rutting beast that beds every willing female.” Was that what she thought of him? He pushed her away, chafed by the remark.

“Really? It didn’t take you long to come after me, and trust me, men don’t look at me the way you do unless they’re after one thing.”

He crossed his arms and met her defiant gaze. “You are right about your mouth getting you into trouble.”

“What? Why? Did I get too close to the truth?”

Pushing off the counter, he stormed out of the kitchen and sank onto the living room couch. He stared out the windows, ignoring the sounds of her footsteps coming after him. The scar above his heart pulsed like a warning. Women were more bothersome than they were worth.

“Look, I know men have needs and all that. Just be up front about it, okay?” She sat next to him, her arm propped on the back of the couch, her head on her hand.

He held his tongue to keep from saying something he would only regret later.

“Ohhh…I see. You’re mad at me, is that it?” She did nothing to hide her smile.

“Aye. I am not speaking to you.” He could play that game as well.

“But you just spoke to me.”

He turned his head toward the fireplace and closed his eyes. The Viking in him wanted to take her to bed and show her just what his needs were. His role as Phoenix made that not only unwise, but impossible without her direct request. The lack of power grated almost as much as being under the thumb of not one woman but two, although Calleigh was much preferable to the goddess. If only his charge would demand his presence in her bed chamber.

“No more talking to me, huh? Okay. The silent treatment it is.” The tone of her voice was light, jesting. She was not taking him seriously.

A warm fingertip traced the line of his jaw. He inhaled at the unexpected touch. Yearning rippled over his skin from that one spot.

“Your skin is so smooth. Don’t you ever shave? Or is that another perk of being a Phoenix?”

He kept his eyes and mouth closed and his focus elsewhere. She would soon learn the strength of a Viking’s will.

Fingers laced through his hair, brushing his ear. Her hands were so soft. Images of them on other parts of his body almost made him smile. He gritted his teeth, determined to push all thought of her out of his head.

More movement.

“I know you want to talk to me.” Her warm, chocolatey breath caressed his cheek.

He crossed his arms in response. If she came any closer she would be on his lap. The idea brought more uninvited images into his head and an unwelcome tightness to his groin.

“Are all Vikings as stubborn as you?”

When he stayed silent she answered her own question. “I guess they are.”

He heard laughter in her voice.

"So, you must obey the wishes of your charge. That's very, very interesting. Makes a girl think, you know?"

If Calleigh wanted to play games, he would oblige her.

"Do you have to do whatever I tell you?"

He opened his mouth to answer, then snapped it shut.

"Hah! You almost spoke. You're not very good at the silent treatment, are you? It's okay, I know you want to talk to me."

Another shift as she moved again.

Thor's hammer! She settled onto his lap, wriggling her backside. Having her lush curves pressed against him was definitely not making *him* comfortable. Women never did play fair. If she did not stop her confounded squirming she would soon feel how uncomfortable she was making him.

He felt her hands on his shoulders and knew if he opened his eyes, they would be nose to nose. Blasted woman. What was she trying to do? Kill him with unrequited lust?

She wriggled again, and his body responded so swiftly he gasped. Opening his eyes, he grasped her hips and held her still.

"Hey! I'm trying to get situated here. It's not my fault you're all hard and muscley."

She had no idea just how hard but if she moved one more time, he was going to break his oath as a Phoenix, take her to bed and show her. Freya would probably confine him to her chambers for eternity after that.

"Stop moving!" he barked.

Grinning wickedly, she touched a fingertip to his nose. "I knew I'd get you to talk to me."

He sighed and rolled his eyes as he leaned back to put a little distance between himself and his saucy charge. He might as well give in. Not talking was doing him little good. "The mention of requesting a kiss from me and you shrink away, scarlet-faced and shy. How is it you now sit on my lap wriggling your bottom against my loins like a shameless wench?"

"What did you just call me?" Her cheeks flushed.

"Do you deny your backside is pressed against me? Or that your behavior has not suddenly become wanton? Where has this new boldness come from?" He watched her, relishing every bit of her that was touching him.

"I am not…wanton." The color from her cheeks spread down her neck and, he imagined, across her lovely bosom.

She scrambled to get out of his lap but he held tight. "I believe I asked you to stop moving. Is that your only response to my questions?"

She sat still. “You said you had to obey the requests of your charge, right?”

He nodded. “That is correct.”

“Then that means I’m your boss. In a sense.”

No fear of rejection then, was that it? He bit the inside of his cheek to keep his smile hidden. “Aye, it does. Do you have a job for me, mistress?”

“Yes.” She swallowed and stared at his chest. “Kiss me again.”

His groin tightened further at her command and his hands tensed around her waist. “Aye, lass.” *With pleasure.*

Her mouth was sweeter this time, not because of the chocolate she had drunk but because she wanted him. He kissed her in earnest, wanting to please her, needing to please her. His charge’s demands were not to be taken lightly.

Parting her supple lips with his tongue, he explored her mouth. She opened willingly, tangling her fingers in his hair, her palms resting at his temples.

The murmurs of pleasure resonating from her throat spurred him on. He pulled her closer, one hand on her hip, one hand on her back.

Sliding a hand into her mass of curls, he eased her head into the cradle of his hand. With soft, nibbling kisses he traveled from her lips to the pale expanse of her newly-exposed throat.

“Oh…oh…Alrik,” she breathed.

The sound of his name caressed by her voice cracked the icy wall around his heart. He could have loved a woman like this, in a different time, in a different place, without the constraints of Freya’s bonds to stop him.

When he reached the neck of her T-shirt, he paused. Although she had asked him to kiss her, she had not given him permission to go further. He hungered to taste more of her but contented himself with the hope that in time, she would ask for that as well.

Eyes closed, she lay across his lap. As he studied her, he slipped his hand away so her head rested on the arm of the couch. Her hands loosely grasped his shoulders. He lifted one to his lips and nuzzled the soft skin on the inside of her wrist. “I do not understand why any man would choose another over you.”

She smiled softly and opened her eyes. She cupped her hand to his cheek. “I guess I just pick the wrong ones.”

Glancing up, she squinted as though she were looking for something. “I’m not the only one with that problem.”

Her hands slid over the fabric of his shirt, caressing his chest. “What happened to you? Why do you have those awful scars all over you?”

The wall of ice around his heart stopped melting. “I was

betrayed."

She scooted off his lap and knelt on the couch beside him. "I don't believe it was that simple. I was betrayed too, but my skin doesn't look like five miles of bad road."

He stood up and walked to the window. "You should start thinking about your next change."

The longer he walked the mortal world, the more he thought about what had befallen his family. It was the same with each charge. Watching them live their lives made him long to fix his. The memories of his death grew more vivid, the pain sharper. His desire for revenge became a palpable thing, like absinth on his tongue.

"Please? I really want to know."

"There is nothing to tell," he lied.

"Then I demand you tell me what happened. Please," Calleigh said.

"As you wish." Not that he had a choice now that she had demanded it of him. "I will tell you but I do so unwillingly."

"Duly noted. Now sit."

He frowned. Another command. Her newfound power had gone straight to her head. That would teach him to give a charge so much control. He did as she asked but sat at the far end of the couch away from her.

"As I told you, I was chieftain of my clan, clan Gunn. A very wealthy clan. We held the largest port on the coast. There was nothing we could not trade for. Many of the neighboring clans truced with us and for good reason. Our men were fierce warriors who won every battle they entered."

How good life had been. "As chieftain, I was highly sought after for marriage. Other chieftains wished to wed their daughters to me, to solidify their treaties. I saw no need to wed. Women were as abundant in my bed as stones along the shore."

Calleigh snorted and lifted her gaze skyward. "Go on."

He ignored her comment and continued. She had asked, after all. "One day I went out to hunt alone, as I often did. I stopped near a stream to water my horse. By the far bank bathed the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. For a moment, I thought I had happened upon the goddess Freya herself.

"I hid and watched her until she left. After that, no other woman would do. I did not know who she was, but I knew I must find her. The next time I returned, she was there again. I crossed the stream father up and came back down on the opposite side so I would not startle her.

"Dagny was even more beautiful up close. We started meeting at the stream. Unlike every other woman I had known, she resisted me.

My desire to have her grew so strong, I was sure I would die of wanting. I thought I loved her. I pledged myself to her and asked for her hand."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "She agreed and promised she would persuade her father, chieftain of a more northern clan, to bless our union.

"On the day of our marriage, our two clans gathered for a wedding feast. My men were well into their cups when Dagny's men struck. We quickly realized her clansmen had only pretended to drink along with us. They were dead sober.

"While her men held me fast and slaughtered my family and clan around me, she revealed who she truly was. Daughter of the slain Keith clan chieftain, a clan we held a blood feud with since one of my men had accidently killed her father, Geirmund, in a hunt."

The memory of the day bore down on him. He stood and fisted his hands in impotent rage. Closing his eyes, he filled his lungs with air and stilled the urge to destroy something.

"You don't have to tell me anymore."

He opened his eyes. Calleigh was pressed against the arm of the couch, biting her bottom lip.

"Aye, but I do. You demanded it of me." His temper flared, not at her, but at what had happened and the enslaved life he now lived.

"Even with the ale in my blood, it took five of her men to hold me."

He yanked his shirt off and pointed to the twin scars above his collarbone. "They used their spears to skewer me to the wall of the longhouse, to hold me while she took her revenge."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in soft O. Whether it was pity or revulsion, he did not know.

"My men had no chance. It was a wedding feast. We wore no armor or chainmail. At Dagny's request, all weapons were laid aside in honor of the two clans coming together. She even requested we not exchange swords during the ceremony."

He paused to steady his voice. "My da and brother were slaughtered before me as were most of my men. My mother and sister were taken captive along with the rest of my clan's women."

He closed his eyes but the images filled his head. The cries of his family rang fresh in his ears.

"When the ground ran red with the blood of my clan, Dagny turned her attention to me. She made a great show of taunting me before her men. Then she buried her father's battle ax here in my chest." He held his fist over the scar above his heart.

"Oh, Alrik. Your own wife." Calleigh stared at his scars, shaking her head slowly. "And I'm whining because Brad cheated on me. I feel

like a fool."

"You are not a fool," he muttered as he slumped onto the couch, exhausted by the memories.

"I can't believe she did that to you." Still shaking her head, she moved to sit closer and wrapped her arms around him.

He pulled away. At any other moment, he would have welcomed her touch but the bitterness that filled him conquered all. "I do not want comfort. I want revenge."

"But revenge will lead to more deaths. Is that really going to make this better?" Her fingers outlined the ragged edges of the scar over his heart.

He flattened his hand over hers, pining her hand and keeping it still. "Revenge is the only reason I became a Phoenix. The chance for retribution, for myself, my family, and my clan."

Silence filled the room for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and low. "I don't know what to say to you to make you feel better but if I had the words, I'd say them. I'm sorry for everything you went through."

He stayed silent. Enough words had filled the air this night.

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "I really am sorry. Thank you for telling me. I know it wasn't easy."

Her kiss seared his skin. He closed his eyes, his pain increased by the knowledge she could never be his.

She stood, the sadness on her face nearly undoing him. "I…I guess I'll go to bed."

He watched her walk around the couch and wondered what life might have been like with a woman who truly cared for him. "Good night, lass."

She smiled and crooked her finger at him. "C'mon, I've got a room for you, too."

He sat up a little straighter, his blood heating at her offer. "You have room for me?"

"No." She laughed. "I have *a* room for you. A guest room. No more sleeping on the couch. This way." She motioned for him to follow her again.

Up a flight of stairs and down a hall, she led him to a bedchamber. She flipped on the light. Pale pink walls surrounded a white metal bed covered with a quilt of roses. Shelves held ribboned medals and trophies topped with dancing figures.

"Sorry about the décor. This used to be my old bedroom. Doesn't get much use since I don't have many guests. Or any guests, really. Anyway, you're welcome to it. The bed's much better than the couch."

"Thank you." This was not the bed he wanted to sleep in, but he pushed that thought from his head. He worried her kindness toward

him was becoming something deeper, something dangerous to her heart.

"After sleeping on that couch myself, I wouldn't wish it on anyone." She turned to go, then stopped. "I meant what I said earlier. You didn't deserve what happened to you. I know words don't make it better, but I am sorry you had to go through that."

"You are right. Words do not make it better," he replied, purposely keeping his voice cool. *Do not love me, lass. I cannot stay no matter what you do.*

Disappointment replaced the kindness in her eyes. Just as well. He would not chance breaking her heart. Better she keep herself distant than dream of things that could never be.

"Good night." She turned again and headed down the stairs.

"Good night," he answered, but she was already gone.

Calleigh forgave him for being bitter. That was understandable. But he certainly hadn't seemed like the same man who'd just kissed her minutes before and told her he couldn't understand why any man would cheat on her. Sweet words but the sweetness disappeared quickly.

Still, she couldn't stop thinking about what he'd told her. Betrayed then murdered by the very woman he'd fallen in love with. How could any woman do that to a man she had married? How could any woman betray the love of a man so fierce and beautiful? What would it be like to have a man like Alrik pledge himself to you?

The bedroom above hers was quiet as she climbed under the covers. One hand tucked beneath her pillow, she lay on her side absorbed in thought.

A man like Alrik could protect her from the world.

The next morning, Calleigh called and left a voicemail for the Human Resources department so they'd know she was on her way to see them. As expected, the ride on the subway didn't thrill Alrik but by the second transfer, his knuckles were no longer white.

She prepped him on how to behave when they got to her office. Don't talk to anyone, don't touch anything, and above all else, stay put. The last thing she needed was a missing Viking in downtown Manhattan.

He carried the empty box she'd brought to hold her personal affects. She wouldn't miss the job, but she'd miss some of the women she worked with. Especially since Jeana was no longer in her life.

The elevator scored big with Alrik and only after she promised they'd ride it back down did he finally get out. Heads turned as she walked down the hall to her desk. Without looking, she knew the eyes

were not on her.

She saw the roses before she got to her desk. At least two dozen bright blooms sprouted from a cut crystal vase. A small square box, wrapped in gold foil, nestled among the flowers.

The woman she'd probably miss most sat at the desk across from hers. Erika glanced up as she walked in. "Girl, you got a gift and if you don't open it up right now, I'm gonna open it for you. Especially since I see you brought your own gift with you." She looked over Calleigh's shoulder and smiled big. "Or is he for me? Please tell me he's for me."

Calleigh ignored Erika's remarks about Alrik. "When did these get here?" There was no card that she could see, but she was pretty sure she knew who the flowers were from.

"A few minutes ago. You just missed the messenger." Erika bobbed her head to the side again to look past Calleigh.

"Hello there tall, blond, and handsome. Do you have a name or should I just call you gorgeous?" Tossing her micro braids over one shoulder, she stood and stretched out her hand. Her long slender fingers were tipped with fuchsia and white French-manicured nails. A multitude of skinny gold bangles jangled around her wrist.

Alrik shook her hand, an amused twinkle in his eyes. "My name is Alrik."

Erika gave him another appreciative glance then raised her arched brows at Calleigh. "Mmm mmm mmm. Honey, where have you been hidin' this one? Your fiancé know you're keeping company with a Greek god?"

"I am not Greek. I am Norse."

"Norse, huh? I'm not big on snow but for you, I'd buy a parka." Erika giggled.

"I haven't been hiding him anywhere. It's a long story." Calleigh plucked the gold box out of the roses and ripped off the wrapping.

"Hmm." Erika clicked her tongue as her gaze traveled the length of Alrik's body. "I bet it is."

Calleigh opened the box and groaned. The engagement ring. She was going to have to return it again. Which meant seeing Brad again, although having faced up to him during her first change made the prospect slightly less daunting. "Erika, you want these flowers? Otherwise, I'm going to pitch them."

"Hmmm?" Erika squeezed Alrik's biceps and fanned herself. "So what gym do you go to, because I'm thinking about switching my membership."

Calleigh tried again. "Hello? Do you want these flowers?"

"I know I want something. I might have to start datin' white boys."

Alrik held up his hand and squinted. “Am I a white boy?”

Erika fluttered her lashes. “Yes, sugarpie, you are.”

“Erika!”

She finally looked at Calleigh. “I’d love them. Shame to throw out perfectly good roses.” She slid the vase over to her desk.

“Alrik, I have to go to Human Resources now so why don’t you sit at my desk while I’m gone. Shouldn’t be too long. You don’t mind, do you, Erika?” Things with HR had better go quickly. Erika looked like she wanted to strip Alrik naked with her bare teeth and lick him like an ice cream cone.

“Mind having Mr. Fine sit across from me? Beats looking at the water cooler. Want some coffee, hotstuff?” Erika sat at her desk and shuffled papers without really looking at them.

“I do not like that drink,” Alrik said.

Calleigh mouthed a silent “thank you” to Erika before giving Alrik a smile. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Half an hour later, she returned. Erika chatted on the phone and Alrik paged through a copy of *Couture*.

“Did Erika give you that?” She reached for the magazine but he swiveled away before she could grab it.

“You are back. Good.” He pointed to something on one of the pages. “Tell me, do all women know these ten secrets for making a man moan in bed?”

“What? Give me that.” She snatched the magazine and looked at the cover. Good grief, it was practically porn. No wonder they’d put Jeana in charge. “No, all women do not know that stuff. Most of it’s just made up anyway to get women to buy that rag.”

Erika hung up. “Everything all right? You look flustered.”

“Today’s my last day. Of my own decision. I cannot work for Mr. Berger anymore.” Calleigh put her coffee cup and a picture of her mom and dad into the box she’d brought.

Erika stood and came from behind her desk. “Oh no, really? I don’t want you to leave. You’re the best deskmate I’ve had since Tessa Wilson used to sit there and have phone sex with her boyfriend. Her ugly boyfriend, might I add.”

Erika bugged her eyes out and Calleigh laughed. “I’m going to miss you, too. I’ll email you and let you know where I end up. Maybe we can still do lunch once in awhile.”

“Sounds good. Can he come, too?” Erika wiggled a finger at Alrik. He grinned.

Smirking, Calleigh put the last of her personal items, a few scented candles and a peace lily, in the box. “Be sure to tell your *boyfriend* I said hi.”

“Sure thing. Take care of yourself.” Erika hugged her.

“You too.” Calleigh returned the embrace then lifted her box of belongings. Alrik immediately took it from her.

“I will carry this.” He rested the box on one hip.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “Let’s go ride the elevator again.”

Brad’s office wasn’t too far away so they walked instead of taking a cab, which was probably for the best. If her driving didn’t agree with Alrik, she could only imagine what a New York City cab ride would do to him.

“When we get there, just back me up on whatever I say, okay?” Calleigh asked. She’d give Brad something to think about.

“Back you up?” Alrik’s brow crinkled.

“Agree with me. If I say the sky is pink, you just nod and say yes it is.” She was getting used to having the Viking around. He really came in handy at times.

“As you wish. This is the man you were to marry? The one who betrayed you?” His eyes glinted darkly.

“Yes. I’m going to give him his ring back. Again.” She shook her head. Brad was such a conniving crapweasel.

“Do you wish that I should injure him?” Nothing in Alrik’s voice indicated he was joking.

“Hah!” Calleigh swerved to avoid a light pole. “As tempting as that offer is, I think I’ll pass. At least for now. But thanks.”

On the way up to the 22nd floor, Alrik pushed every button in the elevator before she could stop him. The numbered panel light up like a Vegas billboard and the suits on board looked like they wanted to shoot him. Alrik didn’t notice and she didn’t care. Let him push every stinking button if it made him happy. He’d had enough unhappiness to justify it.

The office buzzed with activity, so different than the night she’d walked this hall alone. Brad’s secretary smiled at her as they approached. “Hello, Ms. McCarthy. I’ll just buzz Mr. Volk and tell him you’re here.”

“Is he busy? I’d rather just pop in.” Calleigh tried to look as innocent as possible and tucked her ringless hand behind her back.

The older woman eyed Alrik with a questioning gaze.

Calleigh leaned forward like she was sharing a secret. “I got him a personal trainer. It’s a surprise.” Boy, was it ever.

“Oh, isn’t that nice?” The woman waved her hand. “Surprises are so much fun.”

Calleigh wanted to laugh. “Can I leave this box with you for a few minutes?”

“Certainly. Just set it on that chair, I’ll keep an eye on it.” The secretary pushed her glasses back. “Did you like the roses? He had me send them this morning. You lovebirds are so thoughtful of one

another."

Calleigh faked a smile. "They were lovely. Can we go in?"

The woman adjusted the salt and pepper bun at the nape of her neck and glanced down at the flashing lights on her phone. "Go ahead. He should be just about done with his call."

Thoughtful? Is that what you call sleeping with your fiancé's cousin? She pushed open the door. Brad yakked into the phone, his feet propped on the window sill.

He spun around in the chair, the phone still at his ear. He grinned at Calleigh but his smile vanished when he saw Alrik behind her.

Calleigh gave Alrik a big smile. "Shut the door, will you, sweetie?"

Chapter Eleven

"Let me call you back, a client just walked in." Brad hung up, then stood with his hands on his hips and nodded toward Alrik. "What's going on? Who's this guy?"

Calleigh pulled the ring box from her purse and tossed it to him. "Here's your ring. Keep it this time, okay? This *guy* happens to be a very good friend of mine. A very good non-cheating friend."

"What's that supposed to mean? I told you it was just a onetime thing with Jeana. I thought we were working things out."

"Hah," Alrik grunted, blowing a hard breath through his teeth.

Brad glared at Alrik. "This doesn't concern you, buddy. Calleigh and I need to talk privately."

Alrik moved closer to Calleigh and slipped his arm around her waist. "I am not leaving her alone with you."

"Get your hands off my fiancée before I call security." Brad shook a menacing finger at Alrik but remained behind his desk.

Calleigh shook her head. "His hands can stay right where they are. I am *not* your fiancée any longer."

Scowling, Brad huffed. "So you bring this meathead in here to do what? Intimidate me? Show me you can get another guy? Fine, you got another guy. Good for you, but I'm not impressed. Or intimidated. You probably borrowed him from your uncle."

Alrik lunged forward a single step. Brad jerked back and tripped over his chair. He caught the edge of his desk and righted himself.

Stifling a giggle, Calleigh put her hand on Alrik's arm. Rock-hard muscle flexed beneath her fingers. A delicious tingle tripped down her spine, broadening her smile. "I've said everything I came to say." She turned her gaze toward Alrik. "We can go now, sweetie."

"You can't be serious. You'd rather be with this…this long-haired…barbarian than me?" Brad sputtered, something she'd never seen him do before. In fact, he practically foamed at the mouth.

"You bet your Gucci loafers I'd rather be with him." She patted Alrik's chest. "And unlike Jeana, all this is real."

She turned to leave, and Alrik put his hand on the curve of her hip. The possessive gesture sent tantalizing heat through her like wildfire. Her lips quivered with giddiness. She paused at the door, nerves steeled by the allegiance of the man beside her. She looked back at Brad, now red-faced. "One question. Does Jeana have any idea how deep in debt your gambling has gotten you? She's not exactly a low maintenance girl, you know. Trust me. I've known her a lot longer than you have."

His jaw dropped, disbelief glazing his eyes. "How—"

“Anyway, have fun with that. Bye.”

On the other side of the office door, she exhaled. Her hands trembled with adrenaline.

“You did very well. I am proud of you,” Alrik said.

“Thanks. You were pretty good yourself. Grab that box and let’s get out of here. I’m buying you lunch.” She knew just the place to go. Good thing she’d worn her classic black suit. She checked her watch. Perfect. Just enough time to drop the box off at her uncle’s studio for safe keeping.

Her uncle was out, so she left the box with his assistant, Leona, and promised to be back in a couple of hours.

The maitre’d at Aureole ushered them to a table near the windows, right in eyeshot of everyone entering. Not until after they ordered did the person she’d been waiting for show up.

Calleigh held the tall blonde’s gaze, obligating her to acknowledge their presence.

“Hello.” Jeana’s smile was forced, her wave half-hearted and weak. She eyed Alrik like he was the main course on an all-you-can-eat Viking buffet.

“Jeana. How nice to see you. I don’t think you’ve met my date. Alrik, this is Jeana.”

He stared at the tall, leggy woman. By the ice in his eyes, Calleigh knew he was thinking of another blonde in his past. She nudged him. “This is Jeana. My cousin.”

Snapping back to the present, he nodded and laced his fingers through Calleigh’s on the table top. “I know who she is.”

If someone had just filled her with helium, Calleigh couldn’t have felt lighter. His tone said it all. Jeana had just been introduced to a really hot guy who couldn’t care less that she was a really hot blonde.

“Well, nice to see you. I should get to my table.”

Liar. You don’t think it’s nice to see me at all. “Yeah, you probably should.”

Lunch tasted calorie free and when it was over, she didn’t even flinch at the amount on the check.

“That was very good, but why do they put such small amounts of food on such large plates?” Alrik asked.

“That’s *haute cuisine* for you. But we didn’t really come here for the food.”

“I know.” He smiled.

Calleigh could see Jeana’s table when they stood to leave. Jeana stared. She tipped her head in the blonde’s direction as she addressed Alrik. “So if you enjoyed lunch, why don’t you thank me properly?”

He slanted his eyes toward Jeana’s table with a knowing smirk. “If you insist.”

“I do,” Calleigh said. Anticipation made a great dessert.

Still smiling, he drew her close, his hands on her waist. She closed her eyes. His kiss was firm and possessive and perfect. She wanted Jeana to see, to know that another man, a better man, wanted her. Curly hair and all.

Their lips parted but still he held her, his face nuzzled against her neck. He whispered in her ear. “Did that please you?”

“Oh, yes.” A strand of his hair tickled her cheek and she inhaled. He smelled so good. All warm and cinamonny. Why couldn’t he be real instead of some fairy god-Viking? Two more wishes, and he’d be gone. But she’d think about that later. She peeked at Jeana and nodded. “I think that did the trick.”

Jeana powdered her nose and pretended not to look, but Calleigh could see her eyes widen over the rim of her Chanel compact. Good. Maybe Brad would get an earful too.

She slipped her hand into Alrik’s and he knit his fingers with hers. The comfort of his hand was a temporary pleasure, but while he was here, why not enjoy the benefits of having her very own Viking?

As they walked toward the door, he slipped his hand out of hers and onto the curve of her hip as he’d done in Brad’s office. She could only imagine Jeana’s expression at that move.

They held hands again when they got outside. No point in hailing a cab just yet. That would mean letting go. But too many blocks lay between them and her uncle’s studio. If it weren’t for her box of belongings, she might not have gone back at all.

Well, it wouldn’t kill them to walk a little. The next few blocks passed beneath their feet without either of them speaking. She didn’t feel the need to break the companionable silence with needless chit-chat.

The trees were starting to bud, a sign that spring was about to burst forth in all its green blooming glory. Alrik would probably be gone by then. Holding his hand and kissing him and daydreaming about a future she couldn’t have wasn’t doing herself any favors. She slipped her hand free and waved for a cab.

Once in the taxi, she decided to talk to him to keep his mind off the ride. “I really appreciate you playing along with me, with Brad and Jeana. I know it’s petty to want them to think I’m with someone new but it makes me feel better.”

“I am glad to help. I know very well the desire to make your betrayers see they did not best you.” His grip on the edge of the seat loosened a little.

“Well, still. Thanks.” Their knees were touching and even though they’d just been holding hands, the contact seemed more intimate somehow.

“It is I who owe you thanks for the meal. You are kind to pay for all these things for me.” He shook his head, his jaw tightening as he looked out the window. “You should not have to provide for me.”

“I don’t mind. I can afford it.” Especially now that she wasn’t marrying Brad.

“It is not a matter of what you can and cannot afford. A man should have his own means. Thanks to Freya, I have nothing to pay you back with.”

She furrowed her brow. “You mean you usually come with money?”

“Aye, and clothes. Freya sent me the way she did because she is determined to break me. I know if I give in to her, the world would be mine for the asking.”

“So why don’t you?”

“Bedding Freya does not serve my purpose. Besides, she offers little sport. Finding a willing bedmate has never been difficult for me. Why should I choose one just because she demands it?” He sucked in a breath and glanced at her. “I did not mean—”

She shrugged. His words stung. She felt guilty for making him feel like an object. She twisted her purse strap around her finger. “You’re probably right. I bet there are very few women that would turn you down. My uncle is the same way. I’m sorry if I overstepped my bounds.”

He let go of the seat entirely and scooped her hand into his. “I was not referring to you, only Freya. You have done nothing but make me feel welcome in your home and in your life. Do not be hurt by my words, fair eyes.”

“I can imagine how hard it must be for you, adjusting to strange surroundings with nothing of your own.”

His eyes sparkled with his smile. He pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. “I have never had such a charge as you, Calleigh lass. You are as kind-hearted as you are beautiful.”

She tried to control the rising heat in her cheeks. “You said Dagny was the most beautiful woman you had ever seen, and that you thought she was the goddess, so Freya must be beautiful too.” She hesitated, unsure she wanted an answer to her next question. “Do you really think I’m beautiful? Or are you trying to make me feel better?”

He shook his head, his smile fading as his expression became serious. “Dagny’s beauty did not sit in her bones the way yours does. When I tell you you are beautiful, I mean it. Your beauty shines from within as though your heart is filled with stars. You have the kind of beauty that does not fade with age, the kind of beauty that draws a man home no matter the distance.”

Gently, he released her hand and put his own on his heart. “My

word is my bond. It is all I have."

In awed silence, she sat staring at the man across from her. No one had ever said such wonderful, poetic things to her. If only they had come from a man she could actually hold onto for the rest of her life.

"Thanks." *Great, Cal. Is that the most pathetic answer you could come up with? The man tells you your heart is filled with stars and your best response is "thanks"? No wonder you're single.*

She cleared her throat. "I mean, that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. Maybe you weren't trying to make me feel better, but you did." *Boy, did you.*

When they arrived at her uncle's studio, he was back from lunch and meeting with clients. Past the reception desk and into the studio, she saw two men dressed in European motorcycle racing jackets and dark jeans looking through her uncle's thick portfolios. They nodded and pointed as they deliberated in a mix of heavily-accented English and what sounded like German.

Seamus saw her too. He smiled and held up his finger to indicate he'd just be a moment longer.

The first man peered through thick black rimmed glasses at one of the pictures. "Ja, est goot, but more rugged face."

Her uncle flipped the page. "Like this?"

The second man ran a hand over his shaved head. His English was better. "Too pretty. Ve need a man the men vill vant to be and the women vill vant to do."

Seamus grinned. "Maybe I should let ya hire me."

The men laughed with him. The one in glasses waggled his finger. "Zo funny, you are.

"I'm sure I can find a model to suit this campaign. Let me make some calls, set up a few 'go sees' and get some models in here for you guys to look at." Seamus pushed the intercom on his desk. "Leona, come here, love."

A vision of Goth loveliness, Leona emerged moments later from the dark room behind Alrik and Calleigh. The girl's cartoon-red hair was parted down the middle and clipped back in two black heart-shaped barrettes. She grinned at Calleigh and gave Alrik the once over before tugging at her purple fishnet stockings. "Hey, Cal! Who's the dude?"

The Germans turned to look in Leona's direction. Mr. Shaved Head pointed at Alrik. "Zis one is very goot! Why do you not show us pictures of him?"

"Uh yes, why…" Seamus tapped a finger on his chin.

Calleigh could almost see the neon dollar sign lighting up over her uncle's head. She shook her head no. She would not permit

anyone else to make Alrik feel like an object.

"He's very new, very hot." Seamus winked at her. "The hottest male model to hit New York since Travis Fimmel. Everyone wants to book him, very high demand." Seamus sighed as though very disappointed. "He may not fit your budget."

The Germans leaned together, whispering and nodding.

"Who is his agent? Ve vill call and book him immediately. Dieter and I agree. He is perfect. Ve vant him. Exclusively."

Her uncle didn't miss a beat. "I'm his agent. I discovered him, so I'm representing him. I'll have a contract faxed to you in the morning. If you agree to the terms, we can start shooting first thing tomorrow."

"Wait just a minute…" Calleigh put her hands out.

Alrik bent to whisper in her ear. "They are talking about me but I do not understand what they mean."

"They want you to represent whatever product they're selling," she said.

"Why?"

"They like the way you look." She couldn't fault them there. She snapped her fingers to get her uncle's attention. "Can I speak to you? Alone?"

"Just a moment, gentlemen. Leona, make sure we have the fax number at their hotel." Seamus walked over to Calleigh and Alrik. "What is it, love?"

"You can't do this. Alrik isn't a model."

Seamus held his palms up. "Neither was Badu until I introduced her to Valentino. Besides, it's his decision. What do you think, lad? Want to give it a go?"

Alrik wrinkled his brow. "Why would I do this?"

Seamus laughed. "Same reason they all do. For the payola."

"The payola? What does this mean?"

"The cash, lad. I can get you a minimum of five large a day out of these gents, especially for an exclusive deal. Maybe more. But better than that, I can make you a star." Seamus winked at Calleigh again but she shook her head.

"I don't find you amusing," she muttered at her uncle.

"Let me speak with Calleigh," Alrik said.

Seamus nodded and went back to entertain the Germans.

Alrik rubbed his temples and spoke softly. "What does this mean, five large?"

"I think he means five thousand dollars. Or five figures. I'm not totally hip to Seamus's lingo."

"That is a goodly sum, is it not?"

"For a day's work? It doesn't suck." Calleigh had to admit that much.

Alrik exhaled. “Then I will do it.”

“Are you sure?” She wrinkled her forehead. “You don’t even know what they want you to sell.”

“I do not care. I wish to earn my own way.”

“You’re positive you want to do this?” This really didn’t seem like a good idea but she wanted him to make the decision.

“Aye.” He crossed his arms.

“Okay, if you’re sure.” She shrugged and nodded at her uncle.

Seamus grinned. “Leona, get a contract together please.”

He gestured toward Alrik with an open palm. “Gentlemen, let me introduce you to my newest find, Alrik…”

Seamus raised his eyebrows at Calleigh.

She sighed. “Gunn.”

“And this is Mr. Gunn’s…assistant, Calleigh.” Seamus shot her a very amused look as he made his way over to them.

Assistant?

The Germans followed behind and shook Alrik’s hand. “Very goot!”

“I’ll speak with you gents tomorrow. *Auf wiedersehen* and *danke*!” He waved as the pair left then turned to his niece. “Calleigh, me love, I see big things in your boyfriend’s future.”

“He isn’t my boyfriend,” she corrected him, “And I am not his assistant.”

“Whatever you say, lovey. Alrik, nice to see you again, lad.” He clapped the Viking on the back. “Ever done any modeling before?”

“Nay.”

“Well, ye don’t strike me as the shy type, so I think you’ll do okay. Let’s take a few shots, see what the camera thinks.” Seamus jerked his thumb toward the coat rack. “Ditch the jacket.”

Alrik shed his coat as Seamus walked back into the studio and picked up a camera from the table. “Come over here, against this backdrop. Leona love, lights and a little Metallica please.”

The camera’s clicking disappeared in the opening riff of “Enter Sandman”.

Calleigh raised her voice. “Uncle Seamus?”

“Yes, love?” He directed Alrik, pointing for him to turn. “This way, toward me. That’s it. Give me mad but make it smolder. Excellent!”

She tapped her foot. “What exactly will he be modeling?”

Seamus stopped clicking. “Take yer shirt off, lad. Give us a peek at what we’re workin’ with.”

He lowered his camera and looked at Calleigh. “Just the hottest new line of men’s underwear. Yer boyfriend’s going be a very wanted man when I get done shootin’ this campaign.”

The cold fingers of déjà vu tickled her belly. She took a step toward her uncle. “This wouldn’t be for the Uber Homme brand, would it?”

“Been shoppin’ for men’s underwear lately, have ye?”

“Yes. No! That’s not what I meant.” This was too weird. Uber Homme. Just like the billboard she’d seen in the three days she’d been married to Brad. Except the billboard hadn’t been Alrik. “Do you know a model named Paulo?”

“Prima donna Paulo? What about him?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” So he knew the other model. Would Paulo have gotten this job if not for Alrik?

Seamus turned back to Alrik. “Merciful Joseph, lad. What happened to ye?” Mouth gaping, he stared at the Viking’s chest.

In front of the stark white backdrop and the bright lights, Alrik’s scars seemed to glow. “Jealous lover.”

Seamus paled. “Jealous? By the looks of ye, I’d say she was more than jealous.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Calleigh asked. She ached for her Viking. He didn’t deserve those scars.

Seamus wiped a hand over his forehead. “I don’t think so. There isn’t much that good makeup and computers can’t fix these days. ‘Course, it does give him a very unique look.” Her uncle shrugged before lifting his camera to shoot some more pictures.

“Don’t you think you should explain the product to him, Uncle Seamus?” Calleigh tapped her foot a little harder on the wood floor.

He paused again, glanced at her then back at Alrik. “Lad, I’m gonna need to take pictures of you in yer skivvies. Got a problem with that?”

“Skivvies?” Alrik looked to Calleigh for an explanation.

“In your underwear. That’s what those men want you to sell. Men’s underwear.” Calleigh crossed her arms, waiting for his response.

Alrik thought for a moment, then stripped off his jeans. “Like this?”

Seamus’s brows shot up. “Maybe I should call Calvin Klein’s office. The phrase ‘bidding war’ suddenly comes to mind.”

He glanced back at Calleigh. “Well done, lass. Well done. I din’t know ye had it in ye.”

“Uncle Seamus!” Calleigh snapped but she smiled anyway. Alrik really was quite an impressive example of what a Y chromosome could do.

An hour later, Seamus laid contact sheets out on his desk. He stood back to survey his work. “The camera loves ye, lad. Look at these. I could have every menswear label from here to Paris beggin’ for ye if I sent these around. You’re a bit more muscled than the rest

of the lot out there but ye wear it well. And yer eyes."

He blew out a breath and tapped one of the close-ups. "Saints, yer eyes are haunting."

"Is that good?" Alrik asked.

"Very good." Seamus nodded.

Calleigh agreed. Alrik was as hot in pictures as he was in person. And he was going home with her. Life was good.

Seamus shuffled the sheets back together and addressed Alrik. "Enough for today. Get out of here and get some beauty sleep. Write down yer number so I can call after I get the signed contract back from Dieter and Helmut. Although that's just a formality at this point. They'll sign. Plan on being here by 7 a.m. I like to work with the morning light. Don't eat anything tomorrow morning, either. Keep those abs nice and tight."

She interjected before Alrik could announce he had no phone number, or worse, that he was staying at her house. "Just call my cell. We'll be in the city anyway, I planned on taking him to the museums." *Just now I planned it, to hide the fact that he's sleeping in my guest room.*

Seamus grinned wickedly. "You planned on being in the city at 7 a.m.? Or is there something you're not telling me?"

"Just call my cell and stop asking so many questions or I won't let him do this shoot."

A deep laugh rumbled from her uncle's chest. "You won't *let* him? Who are you and what have you done with my meek little niece?"

"Very funny." She scowled at his assessment. Calleigh the mouse was gone.

"Fine, I'll call yer cell phone. Wait, won't you be at work tomorrow?" Seamus looked at his watch. "Shouldn't you be at work right now?"

"I would be, if my ex-boss could keep his hands to himself." She grimaced.

"Och, love. Pity. Ye really should go back to teachin' dance."

"You know how I feel about that. It's not open for discussion." She kissed his cheek and picked up her box of belongings from Leona's desk. "See you tomorrow."

Seamus clapped Alrik on the shoulder and smiled at Calleigh. "Take care of this lad, lovey. I'm about to make him very popular."

She smiled half-heartedly as she and Alrik walked to the elevator. She pressed the down arrow. What would Seamus do when his newest star ceased to exist? Would the pictures of him disappear as well?

Alrik took the box from her as the doors opened and they got on. When the elevator began to move, she realized she'd been so lost in thought, she hadn't noticed Alrik press the button. He was a quick study, even if he had pressed the wrong one. She punched the button

for the lobby as the doors opened onto the third floor.

"Not yet." She put her hand out keep him from getting off.

Holding the box on his hip, Alrik took her hand in his free one and pulled her closer. "I will pay you back the money you have spent on me."

"Don't worry about it." *Or you could pay me back in kisses.*

"I insist." He dropped her hand and traced the line of her jaw with one rough fingertip. "I have no use for money from this time."

"I guess you're right. In that case, okay." She was starting to crave his touch. Even the gentle caress against her skin felt like heaven.

"Thank you." He leaned back against the elevator wall.

She leaned next to him. He was so beautiful. She'd just about gotten used to the way women's heads swiveled after him when he walked by. Even Brad in his Armani suits had never gotten the kind of reaction Alrik did. Now, the whole world was going to see him in his underwear. She wound a strand of hair around one finger. The idea didn't sit well with her. He was her Phoenix. Her Viking. Hers.

"Are you coming?"

"What?" She blinked. The elevator doors had opened again and he waited between them, keeping the doors from closing with his body.

"Oh, yeah, sorry." She pushed off the wall. "I was daydreaming."

"Thinking of your next change?" he asked.

"No. I was thinking about you doing this advertisement for my uncle." She brushed past him on her way out, enjoying the brief contact.

"You were picturing me in my underwear?" He grinned as they exited the building.

Yes. "No! That's not what I meant. Are you sure you should be doing this? This won't get you into trouble, will it?" She could see the subway stop ahead.

"Nay. The restrictions placed on us concern our behavior with our charges and little else. I am glad to do it. Repaying you pleases me." He slipped his hand onto the small of her back, never breaking stride beside her.

She handed him a token as they descended into the station. "If you're sure. You do realize a lot of people are going to see you in your underwear."

"Is that a bad thing?" He followed her through the turnstile.

"Not the way you look," she murmured. The male citizens of Manhattan were about to be compared to an impossible standard.

"What?"

"Nothing."

He grinned and she got the impression he knew what she'd said.

They found two seats on the next train and settled in. At the next stop, a black man in a long tweed coat got on. Strands of gray streaked his beard. Cracked black Ray-Bans hid his eyes. A stout orange tabby with one ragged ear perched on his shoulders. Both man and cat looked like they could use a shower.

Calleigh groaned. This guy was becoming a regular on this route. She fished in her purse for a pre-emptive dollar.

The man lifted a battered saxophone hanging from a cord around his neck. “Ladies and gentlemen, Dizzy and I would be happy to play a tune or two for you in exchange for your spare change. However, you would probably be just as happy for us not to play, since neither one of us really knows how. We’ll gladly take your dollars for that, too.”

He blew into the saxophone to demonstrate. A horrible squealing erupted from the instrument and Dizzy yowled, his ears flattening. Alrik jerked in his seat.

The man took his hat off and began walking up the aisle. Passengers relinquished change and singles as he went by.

Alrik leaned over. “I do not understand. You are giving this man money not to play music?”

Calleigh nodded. “You understand perfectly. We’re giving him hush money. Trust me, it’s worth it. His rendition of ‘Blue Moon’ once shattered a man’s glasses.”

“This is a crazy time you live in.” Alrik shook his head and watched the panhandling duo pass through to the next car. “People will pay to take pictures of me in my underwear and this man gets paid not to play his instrument. What else can one do for money here?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.” She grabbed his hand and stood. “Come on, this is our transfer.”

By the time they arrived at the brownstone, Calleigh had listed and explained just about every job she could think of, from window washer to politician. Alrik nodded, his brows knit, as he took it all in.

He asked her to light the fire when they went inside. After that, he stayed quiet for a while, just staring into the flickering flames. She changed out of her suit then curled up on the couch with a magazine. Snickers crawled onto her lap, batting at the drawstring on her hoodie.

After staring at the same page for the last ten minutes, she couldn’t take it anymore. “What are you thinking about? You’ve barely said two words in the last hour.”

“I am just thinking.” His gaze stayed fixed on the flames.

She put her magazine down. “About what?”

He glanced at her. There was a deep sadness in his eyes. “My family. I miss them. My desire to avenge their deaths grows stronger.”

She sighed wistfully and nodded. “I know how you feel, sort of. My mom and dad are both gone. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of them.”

“What happened to them?”

“My father had a heart attack. His heart just stopped working one day and he was gone. No chance for one last ‘I love you’, no final goodbye.” She twisted her fingers together. “My mother died of cancer. It was long and slow and the most wretchedly awful thing you could ever imagine. Every day was goodbye. I held her hand when… when she died.” She exhaled a deep shuddering breath. “Her skin was like paper.”

Alrik leaned back. “What is cancer?”

“A horrible disease with no cure.” She blinked the memories away and rubbed her eyes. “They left me alone before I was ready.”

“But you still have your uncles and your aunt and cousins.”

“I know. It isn’t the same, though.”

“Maybe you would feel differently if you had a family of your own.” He shifted in the chair, watching her with an intensity that unsettled her.

“What do you mean?” Where was he going with this?

“A husband and babes to look after.”

“Hmmph. You’re one of those barefoot and pregnant guys aren’t you? I should have figured.”

He snuck a look at his feet. “I cannot believe men will bear children in this time or any other. What does that saying mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “Forget it. I’m going to fix dinner.”

The cabinets were pitifully empty. The best she could do was spaghetti with marinara. She rummaged in the freezer. Not a frozen meatball in sight. Behind a package of something unidentifiable, she found a bundle wrapped in butcher’s paper. The sausages were frozen rock solid, but a few minutes on defrost and they’d be sliceable. She shut the freezer door and screamed.

Alrik stood on the other side.

“Don’t do that! You scared the daylights out of me. I didn’t even hear you come in.” She pushed the hair out of her eyes. “How did you get past me?”

He ignored her question and leaned against the fridge. “I do not wish to end this discussion. Tell me the meaning of men bearing children.”

She put the sausages in the microwave to defrost, then filled a big pot with water. “I didn’t mean men have babies. I was referring to your attitude that a woman’s place is barefoot and pregnant. As if that would make me happy.”

“I did not say that.” He tipped his head.

“You implied it.” She lifted the pot out of the sink and onto the stove.

“I did not.” He pushed off the fridge. “You misunderstood my words.”

After cranking on the burner, she tossed a palmful of salt into the water, then turned to face him with one hand on her hip. “So what did you mean when you told me I needed a husband and ‘babes’ to look after?”

“Just that having someone else to love and be loved by would help you miss your parents less.”

“Oh.” How many times had she imagined the pitter-patter of little feet in these halls? When she and Brad had been engaged, she’d dreamed of filling this house with children. So much for that. She nodded at him. “Wouldn’t a family make you feel better too?”

He shook his head. “As a Phoenix, it is not possible. Nor do I desire another wife. One was enough.”

“In your case, one was more than enough.” She smiled softly, the memory of what he’d told her still heavy on her heart.

Arms crossed over his chest, he nodded but his smile didn’t match hers. “That it was.”

A vague sense of disappointment washed through her. The microwave beeped. She was glad for the distraction. Why should it matter if he didn’t want to get married again? All he wanted was vengeance for his family. Part of her understood that very well but there was no vengeance to be had against cancer and heart disease.

After dinner she taught him to play gin rummy. Two hands later and he was winning every game.

“It’s no fun playing with someone who wins every time.” She pouted over her cards.

“Then perhaps you should not have taught me so well.” He slapped his cards down on the table. “Gin!”

“Again? Couldn’t you let me win one hand?” She tossed her hand down.

“Is that what you desire?” He raised a brow.

“No. It’s no fun to win like that.” She narrowed her eyes and put on her best game face. “I want to beat you fair and square.”

“I can think of other games we could play. Games where we both win.” He smiled slyly and leaned forward.

“Like what…oh!” Warmth spread over her cheeks and curled into her belly. “I think we should both just go to bed and call it a day.”

“Very well.” His sly smile curved into a wicked grin. “You may call it whatever you like.”

“That’s not what I meant!” When he smiled like that, sharing a bed didn’t seem like such a bad idea. “I meant go to your own bed.

Tomorrow's going to be a busy day for you."

His voice deepened with undeniable need. "Then perhaps I should start with a busy night."

Chapter Twelve

Calleigh watched for two hours while Alrik stood wearing nothing but Uber Homme briefs, getting his body covered with foundation. Shay, the makeup artist, had done a great job of hiding the scars on his chest. Still, Calleigh prickled as Shay blended the makeup over his bronze skin with her fingers. She wanted to be the one touching him that way, caressing every delectable inch of that beautiful Viking man. Of course, she'd had her chance last night and turned him down. She just wasn't ready to take that intimate a step with a man who was only in her life on a temporary basis.

The only thing that kept Calleigh from yanking Shay's hands off him was the fact that he'd paid no attention to the makeup artist. He'd only had eyes and smiles for Calleigh.

Seamus walked over to them with one camera in his hand and another around his neck. He looked Alrik over then nodded to Shay. "Excellent job with the cover up. I think we're ready. Leona love, music please."

The heavy thumping beat of "Sisters of Mercy" filled the studio with energy. Calleigh bobbed her head and hummed along with the lyrics. *"I want more…"* Did she ever. How long could a virgin look at a hot guy in his underwear and still remain a virgin? She giggled at her own silliness and Alrik smiled back. If only he knew what she was thinking. Maybe she should give in to her urges.

"Lad, no smiling. Isn't the right mood. Give me brooding, sexy, dark and dangerous. Think cover of a romance novel." Seamus snapped away while Alrik took on a more serious expression. "That's it! Give me more of that!"

Indeed. Give me more of that. Give me all of that. Calleigh stifled the bubble of laughter building inside. What on earth was happening to her? This was not the way she usually behaved. But then she didn't normally get to watch a beautiful man get photographed in a very small, very tight pair of briefs every day.

The afternoon sun filled the studio by the time Seamus finished shooting the last roll of film. "Excellent work, really good. I'm sure the boys will be pleased. I'll call if I need anything else."

He smiled in Calleigh's direction. "On yer cell, I presume?"

She stuck her tongue out in response.

"Save that for your lover boy, pet."

Alrik grinned at her uncle's reply. He wondered if the man knew how much he longed to be Calleigh's lover. He tugged his T-shirt over his head and squeezed his chieftain's armlet back onto his biceps. "I

am glad you are pleased with the work but I am near to death with hunger. I do not like going without food for so long."

"Feed the lad, Calleigh. Can't have my new star going hungry." Seamus kissed her cheek. "See you soon, love. Good work, Alrik."

"I could do with some lunch too." Her stomach rumbled and she glanced at her watch. "Or maybe I should say dinner." She looked at Alrik. "What are you hungry for?"

"Meat and ale." *And you.* The way she'd watched him, her bronze eyes sparkling with want, had created a hunger that food would not satisfy. But he would not shame her in front of her kin by telling her what else he desired.

"Uncle Seamus, have any recommendations for a good meat and ale restaurant?"

"McManus's, a few blocks down. They serve a prime rib so grand even himself couldn't finish it."

With his belly full and the day behind him, Alrik wanted nothing more than to tuck Calleigh beside him in a warm bed and put a well-deserved grin on her beautiful face. Knowing that was not likely to happen, he was happy to settle for whatever she wanted to do. The ale's drowsy pleasantness lightened his mood, making him playful.

He held the door for her after she'd unlocked it, pulling her close as she started into the house and burying his nose in her soft, auburn curls. "Mmmm, lass, I love the way you smell. Like something good enough to eat."

His lips brushed the side of her neck and he felt her shiver. A small exhale told him the sensation of having him so close was not unpleasant to her.

"Aren't you full? You just had sixteen ounces of prime rib. How can you even talk about eating?" She tugged the door shut but stayed in his arms.

"Aye, but I have not had my sweets yet. And you are very sweet indeed." He laughed softly as she shook her head, her curls bobbing around her face.

"Are all Vikings as wicked as you?"

He laughed louder. "Fair eyes, you have not yet begun to see my wicked side. I would be happy to demonstrate, however—"

"I'm sure you would but I think I can use my imagination." She eased out of his grasp. "I'm going to go change into some comfy clothes then I was thinking we could watch a movie."

"A movie?"

"It's like TV only no interruptions for selling things."

"Ah, very good. Whatever you wish."

"Great. Okay, I'll be back in sec."

"Should I change as well?"

"Sure, you can if you want to. Just put on whatever you're comfortable in."

"I am comfortable in nothing." He grinned, waiting for her response.

"Alrik! Clothes, please. I've seen you in your underwear all day. There's only so much a girl can take."

Words came to his tongue but he held them back. Instead, he shrugged. "As you wish."

He went upstairs and changed into sweatpants and a T-shirt and returned to the living room. Calleigh was already there, standing in front of a rack of what looked like thin, shiny books. Her hair was tied in a messy knot at the nape of her neck, exposing a pale expanse of mother-of-pearl skin. Gone were the loose plaid pants and baggy T-shirt. Instead she wore pale green satin pants trimmed in lace and a matching top that buttoned up the front. The fabric skimmed her body, accentuating her curves and her fair coloring. He tried to swallow his desire but his hands itched to slide beneath the fabric and feel the silk of her skin.

"Is this to your liking?" he asked, hoping his voice did not betray the need heating his blood.

She glanced up and sighed. "Is there anything you don't look good in?"

Before he could reply, she held up one of the slim books. "I can't decide which DVD. I was originally thinking *Kate and Leopold* but Meg Ryan's a blonde and I don't think either one of us are particularly fond of blondes right now."

She slid another one from the shelf and held it up. "How do you feel about the *Matrix*? Nevermind, that might be too far out." She tucked the two books back onto the shelf and ran her finger along the edge.

"Here we go. A remade classic and the female lead isn't blonde. *Sabrina* it is." She pulled out the book, opened it up and popped out a shiny silver disk.

"What is that?" By the looks of it, the disk was a blade of some sort. She held it by the middle, careful not to touch the edges. They must be very sharp.

"It's a DVD. It's the movie."

He narrowed his gaze. As a weapon, it would be highly effective since the blade was sharpened all around. "That is a movie?"

"Yeah, here, check it out." With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the sparkling disk at him.

The flash of silver ignited his warrior instincts. In one swift motion, he dodged the DVD, leapt over the couch and pinned her to

the wall. The DVD clattered to the floor.

"Get off me, you big oaf. What are you doing?" She struggled to pummel him with her fists but his hands were locked around her wrists.

"What did you mean by throwing that blade at me?"

"It's not a blade, it's a movie."

"Why did you not touch the edges then?"

"Because the movie doesn't play very well with fingerprints all over it. Besides, why would I throw a blade at you anyway? I like you, you dumb Viking."

She liked him. He released her wrists. She was not Dagny. And he had touched her without permission.

"I can't believe you think I would try to hurt you." She shook her head.

He sunk to his knees at her feet and bowed his head. Freya would enjoy this. "Forgive me," he murmured. "My past has made me a fool."

How could he have reacted that way? Nothing about Calleigh or the way she treated him was anything like Dagny. No lies, no duplicity. But the warrior in him saw nothing but the flash of a weapon, the possibility of danger. The memory of that fatal day.

Calleigh had not yet moved. Would she banish him? It was within her power. Never before had a charge ordered him to leave their side. But it could happen. He prayed she would forgive him.

Fingers tangled in his hair. Gentle, soothing, trembling fingers. "I'm the one who should apologize. You had no idea what that DVD was and I should know by now your instincts are to protect yourself."

She sank down beside him, cradling his face in her soft hands. "You scared the crap out of me, though. Try not to do that again, okay?"

"Never again. I swear it on my life. But I should be the one begging your forgiveness." For the first time in his life, the thought of begging a woman for something actually held merit.

"You're forgiven. Unless you can think of a better way to earn your way back into my good graces." She laughed at her own words and her smile soothed away the last of his shame. She dropped her hands to his shoulders.

Her touch renewed his spirit and filled his mind with new ideas. Thor's thunderbolts, he wanted to kiss her again. "I am at your command. Anything you wish of me, I shall do. Anything."

"Then I have a question I want you to answer." Her gaze lowered and her jaw tightened. "Did you enjoy having Shay's hands all over you today?"

He tipped her face back towards his. "Shay?"

“The girl who put the makeup on you.”

“Ah. I had forgotten her.”

Calleigh’s jealousy sent a bitter thrill through his gut. He hoped it was rooted only in the possessiveness most charges felt toward their Phoenix and not because of stronger feelings. He did not want to break her heart when he left. Especially when he would not be able to come back and explain the hurt away.

The entire time the girl had worked on him, he could think only of having Calleigh’s hands on him instead. But telling Calleigh that could cause her feelings for him to grow.

“Well?” she asked.

He could not lie to her but he could hold back part of the truth. “I did not enjoy it overmuch. Why do you want to know?”

A half-smile turned up one corner of her mouth. “Just curious.”

She started to get up but he stopped her with a question. “Did it make you jealous to see another woman’s hands on me?”

Faint color swept across her cheeks. She bit her lip and lifted one shoulder.

Her lack of answer was answer enough. She was jealous. Jealous in the way of a woman whose heart had begun to do her thinking. “I am your Phoenix, loyal to you alone.” He helped her up.

“I guess that’s good to know.” She shrugged as if it did not matter but he could sense there was more to what she was feeling.

He should pull away from her, make her think him uncaring and cold but he did not want that. He liked Calleigh more than any other charge who had summoned him. Everything about her made him happy, her kind spirit, her sweet laugh, her genuine heart, her forgiving nature. With startling clarity, he realized he wanted her for his own. The thought broke his heart anew.

He sat with her on the couch and they watched the movie. Occasionally, Calleigh would explain something or tell him “this is a great scene.” Her comments did not seem to need a response and he was glad for the time to think. After a while, she stopped explaining things.

He glanced over. Her eyes were closed and her head rested on her arm. Her rosy lips were parted, her breathing deep and even. She was so fair. In sleep her innocence was like a tangible thing draped about her shoulders.

He took the blanket from the back of the couch and covered her, careful not to wake his sleeping beauty. The movie forgotten, he sat watching her instead, trying to force the moment into his memory for the time when he would no longer be at her side.

* * *

Calleigh bolted upright with a sob, the haunting dream of her mother's last days in the hospital still piercing her brain. Tubes everywhere. Machines beeping. The cold wash of green fluorescent light. The medicinal smell of the scrubbed white halls.

She inhaled hard, scrubbed at the tears wetting her cheeks and her elbow bumped something hard. Alrik held her on his lap.

"Hush now, the dream is passed."

"How did I get in your lap?" The last thing she remembered was sitting on the couch beside him watching the movie. Some infomercial played on the screen now.

"I have overstepped my bounds." He loosened his embrace. "But you wept in your sleep. I did not know what else to do but hold you." He lifted her off his lap and moved her back to the cushions but she clung to his neck.

"No. I want to stay here." She sniffled and relaxed against his chest. The solid muscle comforted her in a way ice cream never had. "I have these dreams sometimes, about my mom. It's like I'm reliving everything all over again."

She could feel him nod. When he spoke, his voice was distant. "I know about dreams."

"Do you know how to make them stop?"

He shook his head, ruffling her curls. "I wish I did, fair eyes."

One last, quiet sob shook her body before she spoke. "I'm ready to make my next change."

He tensed then relaxed again so quickly she almost wasn't sure she'd felt it. "What is it?"

She sat up so she could look at him. "I don't want my mom to have died of cancer and my dad to have suffered a heart attack. Can I change that?"

"Aye but—"

"Good."

"But if they were meant—"

She held her hands up. "Just do it. Please. It's what I want more than anything. No more nightmares, no more missing them, no more pain. And don't forget, you said you would stay with me."

He sighed resignedly. "I will return as quickly as possible. I must be gone for a little time, to cause the change to occur."

"Good enough. I'm ready then."

Alrik eased her off his lap and stood facing her in front of the TV. There was a look on his face she didn't like. He didn't meet her eyes when he spoke. Instead, he stared ahead, eyes fixed on some distant point. "With the power of the Phoenix, I grant this change."

From his shoulders the now familiar but still amazing wings of fire unfurled with a soft hiss. Their crimson glow burnished his

unsmiling face with coppery light. She wanted to be inside those wings with him, to feel the warm caress of the gentle heat wafting over her body, to be held in his comforting arms.

Think about Mom and Dad. It will be wonderful to have them back. She stayed where she was on the couch as the blaze surrounded him. When his face disappeared behind the feathers of flame, a small sadness tugged at her heart. *He's coming back as soon as he can.*

Just as before, the fire flared brightly then snuffed itself out from the floor up.

A faint ring of ashes marked the carpet in front of the television. Her Viking was gone.

Chapter Thirteen

This time, Calleigh woke before her alarm went off. She couldn't wait to see her parents. Maybe she could convince her mother to close the studio so they could spend the day doing girl stuff.

She sat up in bed and stretched. Everything was a blur. She blinked a few times but her vision was as clear as Vaseline. She fumbled her hand over her nightstand.

Glasses.

She still wore glasses! Of course. She hadn't had her LASIK surgery until her mom had passed away. It was the one extravagant thing she'd spent her inheritance on.

Same old wire rims, too. She plopped them on her nose and smiled. She was in her old bedroom, not her parents' redone master. Snickers curled at the foot of the bed, tail tucked over his nose. Happiness bubbled up inside her like it was Christmas morning.

Grabbing her robe, she headed downstairs, pulling the worn chenille on as she went. The house was quiet. Unusual for her parents to sleep past seven. The door to their room was open, so she stuck her head in.

The bare mattress and partially-filled boxes on the floor sent an icy shiver down her spine. Something wasn't right. Where were her parents?

"Mom? Dad?" She called out, praying for a response. She got none.

A stack of mail sat on the table near the door. She grabbed it and read through the envelopes. Some were addressed to her, some to her dad and one piece of junk mail to her mom. Well, that was a good sign, right?

The return address on one of envelopes addressed to her caught her eye. *Genesis Assisted Living.* She ripped it open. It was a bill for forty-five hundred dollars and it had her father's name listed under patient. She scanned the paper, trying to make sense of it. Why was dad listed as a patient in an assisted living center? What was going on?

Uncle Corri would know.

The phone rang twice before the receptionist answered it. "McCarthy, Davis and Reagan. How may I direct your call?"

"Corrigan McCarthy, please." She started a pot of coffee while she waited to be put through. After an endless Muzak interlude, her uncle picked up.

"Corrigan McCarthy."

"Uncle Corri! I have a question for you—"

“Calleigh love, why didn’t you tell Marta it was you? She would’ve put you through quicker.”

“It’s okay. I just have a question. What’s this bill from Genesis Senior Living doing here?” *And what is Daddy’s name doing on it?* She hoped he offered enough info so she didn’t have to come right out and ask. He would think she was losing her mind.

He sighed. “Did that come to you again? I’ve filled out the bloody paperwork three times already trying to get them to switch that billing address. Don’t worry about it, just give it to yer Aunt Moreen when she comes to pick you up.”

“Aunt Moreen is coming to pick me up?” Calleigh didn’t want to sound like she didn’t know what was going on, but she didn’t. She knew things were going to be different. How different was the question.

“Of course, unless you changed your mind about visiting your mother.”

Visiting her mother? Where was her mother? Was she in some nursing home, too? “No, of course not. I just forgot it was today, is all. Around noon, right?” she bluffed.

“Unless you changed the time with your aunt, I think she’s still coming at ten.”

“Ten! Oh yeah, that’s right. Don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s okay, love. You’ve had a lot on you lately with yer dad and all. I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay, talk to you later.” She hung up more confused than when she started. What had happened to Dad? In a few more hours, Mom would straighten everything out.

She stared at the bill while she drank her coffee. When the caffeine finally entered her bloodstream, she picked up the phone again and dialed the number on the paper.

“Genesis Assisted Living.”

“Hi. I got a bill—“

“Is this a billing question? Please hold.”

“No! Wait, I—” “Stairway to Heaven” on pan flute filled the receiver. How oddly appropriate for a nursing home, she thought.

Finally someone answered. “Mrs. Lynch, billing. How can I help?”

“Hi, my name is Calleigh McCarthy and I received a bill with my dad’s name on it and I was wondering if I could get an update on his condition.”

“This is billing. I’m going to have to transfer you to patient care.”

More Muzak. More waiting.

“Patient care, Doreen speaking.”

“Hi Doreen, I’m trying to get an update on my father’s condition, can you help me?”

"Your father's name or patient number?"

"Eagan McCarthy." She scanned the bill for a number. "22-14-62."

"Just a moment." More Muzak. "Your name please?"

"Calleigh McCarthy."

"I'm sorry Ms. McCarthy, you're not listed as Mr. McCarthy's guardian. I can't release any information about him to you."

"What are you talking about? I'm his daughter! Of course you can release his information to me." What twisted reality had she wished herself into?

"I'm sorry, ma'am. The patient privacy act of New York forbids releasing this kind of information to anyone but the patient's guardian."

"And who, exactly, might that be? Can you at least tell me that?" Frustration stung her eyes.

"Corrigan McCarthy is the listed guardian."

She was going to have to ask Uncle Corri what was going on after all. Or maybe not…there was one more possibility. "Can you give me Eagan McCarthy's room number?"

"1217."

"Thank you." Calleigh hung up. A slight tremble shook her hands as she hit redial.

"Genesis Assisted Living, how may I direct your call?"

"Room 1217, please."

There was a brief pause. "I'm sorry, those rooms don't have phones for safety reasons."

"Safety reasons?" The trembling kicked up a notch.

"Well, you know how they can be. Just last week one of them got into the nurses' station and made a long distance call to Sri Lanka. Just pushing buttons, the poor thing, but still, someone has to pay the charges."

Calleigh's vision blurred a little. "What section is room 1217 in?"

"That's the Autumn wing."

"The Autumn wing?"

"The Alzheimer's and dementia center."

She mumbled a thank you and dropped the phone into the cradle before falling back into her chair. *Alzheimer's and dementia.* She slipped her hands around her coffee cup, craving the warmth on her skin.

Daddy hadn't died of a heart attack but this wasn't better. She couldn't imagine her father with such a terrible disease. He was so sharp-witted. The most brilliant man she'd ever known.

She shook her head. Her father did not belong in a home with strangers looking after him. She'd talk to her mother this afternoon.

They'd bring him home and take care of him.

She drained her coffee and went to take a shower.

By 9:45, she was pacing, wondering why Aunt Moreen couldn't be early for once in her life.

When her aunt pulled up, Calleigh jumped in the car. The sweet smell of lilies greeted her. A bouquet of the white flowers, her mother's favorite, rested on the back seat.

"How's my favorite niece this morning?"

"Do you think you could take me by to see Dad later this afternoon?" She buckled her seatbelt, wondering if her mom would look any different.

"And good morning to you, too." Moreen leaned over and kissed Calleigh's cheek. "Of course I'll take you to see yer father, if you're sure that's what you want."

"It is, yes. Thank you and good morning. Sorry, I guess I just have a lot of stuff on my mind."

"It's all right, love. I know you do. Bridget said to tell you hi and to remind you about the feis."

Calleigh smiled. Not that much had changed after all. She lost herself in a lengthy conversation about Bridget and the twins.

When Moreen brought the car to a stop, Calleigh took a good look at her surroundings for the first time since she'd been in the car.

"What are we doing here?"

"To visit your mother, child. That's the whole reason we came." Her aunt reached into the back seat for a bouquet of lilies.

Calleigh shook her head in disbelief. Her knuckles whitened as her grip on the door handle tightened. "No. Not here. This isn't right. This isn't what I wanted."

* * *

"In a hurry, Viking?"

Alrik swung around, Calleigh's hourglass still in his grasp. He quickly flipped it over so her change would begin and placed the timepiece back on the shelf. "I do not know what you mean, goddess."

She trailed her hand over the globes of a few hourglasses as she came toward him. The crystal grains jumped in response to her fingers passing by. What havoc had she just wrecked with her whim? A love lost? A friendship ended? A lie revealed?

"Then you were on your way to see me? I think not." She stood before him now, the shimmering blue of her diaphanous pleated gown the perfect match for her eyes.

"Each Phoenix must come before me and announce the change

their charge wishes to affect. You know that. And yet, I find you here, in the Hall of Time, inducing your charge's change while I know nothing of it."

The chill of her gaze swept over him. For once it held no lust, just anger. Let the goddess feel what she would. He cared little about pleasing her.

"My charge has requested I return to her as soon as possible."

"Requested?" The venom in her voice was unmistakable.

"Commanded."

His answer did nothing to soften her temper. "And so you must scurry back like a lovesick errand boy?"

"I am not lovesick. And if I am an errand boy, it is only what you have made me." He clenched his hands into fists.

She tossed her head back and laughed. "What *I* have made you? You became a Phoenix of your own free will."

"I must go." He brushed past. She grabbed his arm, her fingers icy on his skin.

"You are *not* dismissed. I do not care what your precious mortal has commanded, I am not done with you, Viking." She pulled him closer.

"I know you desire her. I see it in your eyes when you speak of her. Slake your lust with me and I promise you more pleasure than that ordinary creature could even dream of giving you."

Her honeyed tone sickened him. He yanked his arm out of her grasp. "She is not ordinary."

The cold fire returned to Freya's narrowed eyes. "You love her."

"I love no one."

"You loved Dagny." The goddess shook her head and snorted in disgust. "I see now how easy it must have been for her to bring you down."

If Freya had slapped him, he would have felt it less. The bitter sting of her words caused his blood to rise. Goddess or not, it matter little. He would not contain his rage this time. He opened his mouth to speak when another voice rang out.

"Freya, my love. I have been looking for you." Eros stood in the arched doorway leading into the Hall of Time. He wore nothing but a short wrap of linen about his hips. He shot Alrik a quick glance before speaking to the goddess again, his voice thick with emotion. "I have need of you, my lady."

Alrik heard an undercurrent of something else in the demi-god's otherwise hungry plea.

A pleased smile lit Freya's face. "Of course you do, pet. How good of you to seek me out."

She moved past Alrik, speaking to him without taking her eyes off

Eros' nearly naked form. "Go to your charge, Viking. I will deal with you when your time with her is up."

Not until Freya was nuzzling Eros's neck did he make eye contact with Alrik again. It was a look the Viking instantly recognized, but his thoughts returned to Calleigh. There would be time enough later to wonder what payment Eros would exact in exchange for distracting the goddess.

Chapter Fourteen

"What are you talking about, lass? You told me yourself you wanted to visit yer mother last week." Aunt Moreen looked at Calleigh with deep concern.

"Not here. Why here? This isn't right." Calleigh stared out the window at the cold granite headstones. "This can't be right."

"Sweet child, you've had a rough few weeks. Maybe it's best I just take you home. In fact, why don't you come stay with us for a while? It must be terrible lonely in that house by yerself."

Calleigh turned to look at her aunt. "This is a cemetery."

Moreen nodded slowly, gravely. "That's right, love. Come on now, let's go home."

"My mother is here?" An old, familiar pain sprung to life in Calleigh's gut.

Moreen nodded again. "That's right."

"Why? She wasn't supposed to die." This was wrong. This was not what she wanted.

"I know, love. It was a terrible accident." Moreen patted Calleigh's hand. "Blasted drunk drivers. At least they took that man's license away and threw him into prison where he belongs. It'll be a cold day in a very hot place before he walks the streets a free man."

No, no, no. A drunk driver had killed her mother? Why had this happened? When had this happened? The headstone would tell her that much. "Can I give her those lilies?"

"Of course you can! I'll wait here so you can have some time alone."

"No, come with me. Please." Feeling a little numb, Calleigh followed her aunt. The thick perfume of the lilies wafted up from the wrapped bouquet in her hand, churning her stomach with its sweetness.

A simple rose granite headstone marked her mother's grave. She read the dates carved into the stone. Her mother had been dead almost a year. She glanced down at the date on her watch. In two days, it would be a year exactly. No wonder her aunt and uncle thought she had so much to deal with. If they only knew the truth.

She knelt to lay the flowers at the base of the headstone and trailed her fingers over the carved grooves that spelled out Catherine. *I miss you so much, Mom.* She shook her head. Maybe a crappy life was her destiny after all.

A small seed of anger took root. She wondered if Alrik had known this would be the outcome of her change. Where was he anyway? He promised he'd come back as soon as he could. Men were such

unreliable creatures. Well, most of them.

She stood up and brushed bits of leaf off her jeans. “I’m ready to go see Dad.”

The stark medicinal tang of the nursing home ate away at Calleigh’s resolve that things were going to get better. The cheery colors and flowered-wallpaper did nothing to soften the reality of the halls they decorated.

They signed in at the guest desk and she followed her aunt to the Autumn wing. Through the first open door she saw a woman sitting in a chair talking to herself, tearing a tissue to shreds. Through another, a man stared at a television playing daytime soaps while he petted a stuffed cat on his lap.

Her heart ached. Was this what had become of her father?

Moreen stopped in front of #1217. “I’ll go wait in the visitor’s room, so you can have some time alone with him. Take as long as you like, I’m in no hurry.”

“Thanks, Aunt Moreen.”

Her aunt squeezed her hand and turned to go but then hesitated. There was sadness in Moreen’s eyes when she looked at Calleigh. “Just remember him when he was well, love.”

Calleigh furrowed her brow as she watched her aunt walk away. She hesitated a moment before going in. She had no idea what shape her father was in. Was she ready for this? Was there any way to be ready?

She knocked softly, then opened the door. “Daddy?”

A nurse was trying to give medication to an old man in a recliner. The TV was playing an *Andy Griffith* rerun. “You need to take this. Opie can wait.”

“Fool woman, quit tryin’ to poison me,” the man rasped. He swung wildly at the small paper cup of pills in her hand.

The nurse glanced up when Calleigh entered. “Maybe you can get him to take these. He’s been fighting me all morning.”

She turned back to her patient. “Your daughter’s here. You want her to see you behaving like this?”

Calleigh inhaled sharply, the smell of the place making her lightheaded. This man couldn’t possibly be her father. Her father was bright-eyed and kind. This man was thin and washed out. Black-rimmed glasses in need of a good cleaning obscured dull brown eyes.

He peered around the nurse’s ample figure. “That’s not me daughter.”

A quiet sigh of relief slipped from Calleigh’s lips. This was just some sort of mix-up. This man with the rough brogue might be a distant relative of hers but certainly not her father. She was about to

ask the nurse where she might find her Eagan McCarthy when the old man spoke, tears in his eyes. “Catherine, you’re back! I missed ye so much, love.”

At the sound of her mother’s name, Calleigh’s heart crumbled. This man *was* her father. “Daddy? Daddy, it’s me, Calleigh.”

“Ye’ve got to help me, Catherine. This blame woman’s tryin’ to poison me. Did ye come to take me home?”

He looked straight at her but Calleigh knew he wasn’t seeing her. How had her father turned into this paper shell of a human being?

“Take me home, Catherine,” he pleaded.

She held out her hand to the nurse. “Give me the pills, I’ll see he takes them.”

“Good luck,” the woman mumbled on her way out.

Calleigh pulled a chair beside her father and sat down. “Daddy, it’s me, Calleigh, your daughter. Remember?”

For a moment, she thought she saw recognition in his faded brown eyes. *Please remember me.*

“I don’t want peas again for dinner. No peas. I don’t like them.” He sat back in the chair, eyeing her suspiciously.

She shook her head. “Okay, Daddy, no peas.”

“No peas, no peas, no peas…” He whispered the words under his breath, rocking slightly as he spoke.

The anger born at her mother’s graveside grew inside her, built up by fresh pain and new resentment. This wasn’t fair. Her father wasn’t supposed to end up like this.

Tears stung her eyes as she filled his glass with water from a nearby pitcher and offered him the pills. “Here you go.”

“What are those? I don’t want them.”

“Vitamins,” she fibbed. “They’re good for you,” she added. Well, that wasn’t a complete lie, she supposed.

“No. They’re poison, aren’t they?”

“Catherine wants you to take them.” Lord help her, that was dirty pool.

He nodded and took the pills, his gaze drifting back to the television screen. He laughed a little and she contented herself to just sit beside him while he watched the old black and white show. No one in Mayberry even got Alzheimer’s, did they? She patted her father’s blue-veined hand.

He looked at her, furrowing his brow. “What’s your name?”

“Calleigh.” She smiled, hoping for some recognition at last.

He smiled, a brilliant mega-watt grin that shone like the noonday sun and for the first time, he looked like the man she remembered. “I have a daughter named Calleigh.”

She nodded but said nothing, afraid to interrupt his thoughts.

"She's a beautiful lass, just like her ma and smart, too. She just turned two. Or three…" He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. After a moment, his eyes went back to the TV.

I'm right here, Daddy. Don't you see me? Don't you recognize me? She wanted to shout the words but instead she squeezed his hand gently. "And she loves you very much."

If he heard her words, he didn't acknowledge them. He laughed again as Aunt Bea scolded Andy for something.

Calleigh stood and kissed her father's cheek as her heart broke into pieces. "Bye, Daddy. I love you. I'm sorry about all this. I really am."

"No peas, no peas, no peas…" He rocked in the chair.

A new emotion sluiced through her like a flood surge. Brighter and sharper than any anger she'd felt before in her life, this had a raw, wounded edge to it. Her hands fisted at her sides.

She wanted to hit something. Or someone.

* * *

Alrik paced the brownstone's wood floors until he thought he might wear a path. Where was Calleigh? Her car was parked outside but she was not home. The sun was well set. She should have been home by now. He worried that the shock of the change might have caused her to do something rash.

Snickers yowled, weaving his furry body between Alrik's legs.

"I do not know where your mistress is, little cat. It worries me, also." He bent down and scrubbed the cat's back with his fingers.

The doorknob jiggled. He glanced up as Calleigh entered. Her face was pale, her eyes and nose red. She had been crying. Still, the sight of her made his heart leap. He wanted to protect this woman. Freya was right, much as he hated to admit it.

He had fallen in love with his charge.

He stood and held his arms out. "Calleigh lass, I am so sorry—"

Her chest rose with a sudden inhale. She slammed the door. Her eyes narrowed, the muscle along her jaw tightening. "You."

Not the reception he had hoped for, but one he had known was possible. "I know it was not as you—"

She wrenched her coat off and threw it over the couch. "You have no idea what it was like."

He started toward her. "I can expl—"

"No." She held her hand out. "I've had enough. Enough of you. Enough of your warped magic."

Plainly exhausted, she slumped onto the floor and gathered the

cat into her arms. Her body shook with quiet sobs.

Pain radiated off her in waves. The scar over his heart throbbed like a new wound. “I know you are hurt. I tried to tell you this—“

“What?” Her chin lifted. Wet trails streaked her cheeks. “You never tried to tell me this would happen. If you had, I never would have made this change. Never. My mother is *still* dead, you know. That wasn’t what I asked for. And my father…”

Her voice cracked. She turned her head away, new tears wetting her face. “My father doesn’t even know who I am.”

He blew out a breath and kneeled beside her. How many times had he been through this with a charge before? “I did try to tell you but you insisted on having your change immediately. Everyone has an appointed time to die. That cannot be changed unless their time is unjustly cut short.”

“You don’t think cancer is unjust?”

He shrugged. “It is not for me to decide.”

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. “Just make this change go away.”

“As you wish.” He reached to help her up but she pulled away.

“I don’t need your help.” She got up on her own and crossed her arms over her chest.

He dropped his hands to his sides. He understood her hurt and although he wanted to ease her pain, he left her alone. Once the change was undone, she would feel better.

Opening his arms, he tipped his head back and thought the Words of Power. Heat shot up his spine and across his back as the wings unfolded. The fire surged through him, molten and needy. It clawed at his belly, tightened his muscles and caressed his skin with a lover’s urgent touch. Thick as honey, the fire swept over him. The Phoenix was reborn.

“Come,” he bade her.

“I don’t have to wait three days?”

“Not if you wish otherwise.”

“I do.” She stepped into the circle of his arms. Resentment burned in her eyes, brighter than the reflected flames. “It will be all right,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes without answer and turned her face away from him.

Resigned to her silence, he wrapped his fiery wings around her and gave the fire its release.

When the flames burned out, they were back in Calleigh’s living room. The television still displayed the same pictures. The hands on the mantel clock still pointed to the same hour. The change was undone. She should be happy now.

“You are home, fair eyes. Safe and sound.” He smiled. Perhaps she would kiss him again. He burned to tell her his feelings. But what good would that do either of them? When her third change was made, he would be gone. Better he save her that hurt.

“Is this a game to you?” she snapped.

“A game? I play no part in the changes that are made. I am simply the messenger.”

“Well your delivery sucks. I’m so mad at you right now I can’t think straight and you act like we’ve just been out for a Sunday drive.”

He shook his head. “Nay, I tried to explain—“

“Yeah, I know. You tried real hard.” The muscle along her jaw twitched as her mouth set in a hard line. He was reminded of the way Freya had recently looked at him.

“Changes are not always for the good.” She just needed time to cool off, he decided.

“Are they ever? Because I’m two for two in the red here.”

He furrowed his brow, unsure of her meaning and not wanting to upset her further. “Perhaps if you would just allow me to explain—“

She pressed her fists against her eyes and moaned, a deep guttural howl that Alrik had never heard from a woman before.

He stepped back.

She pulled her hands away and stared at him. “Get out of my house.”

“But I am to stay until—“

“Get out. Now.” Her jaw muscle twitched again but her eyes never left his. “I command it.”

Stung but compliant as he must be, Alrik nodded and removed himself to Valhalla.

Chapter Fifteen

After Alrik's vanishing act, Calleigh stayed in for the next few days. Not even the thought of pad thai could get her out the door. She turned off her machine and didn't answer the phone. Didn't check her email. Tried not to think about Alrik. That didn't work quite as well.

She was mad. At herself, mostly. And for the way she'd treated Alrik. She'd struck out in anger. It wasn't his fault she'd gotten what she'd asked for. The expression on his face when she'd demanded he leave stuck in her head like an overplayed commercial jingle. The hurt in his eyes haunted her. Even his body language had changed. The proud set of his shoulders had become the slumped posture of wounded little boy.

She owed him an apology and not being able to give it to him was making her miserable. Compounding that was the way she just plain missed him. His smile. His accent. The smell of cinnamon when he was in the room. The way butterflies stormed her stomach when he got close.

She was a horrible person. Despicable. Worse than an eBay sniper. She deserved the life she'd gotten if that was how she treated people.

Even a quart of peanut butter fudge ice cream couldn't make her feel better. She needed to apologize. Had to. And she would. Just as soon as he came back.

He would come back, wouldn't he? He had to. She still had one change left.

She moaned. One more change to go. There wasn't a single thing she could think of that she even wanted to attempt changing. She'd screwed up the last two royally. Why torture herself with a third?

Nothing looked good in the fridge. The cheese was green, the lettuce was brown and whatever had been in the plastic container was starting to reproduce. She was out of toaster-tarts and cereal bars and all the other pre-packaged goodness her cupboards usually held. It was really time to do some grocery shopping.

The doorbell rang so she shut the fridge and went to see who it was. Maybe it was a delivery man gone astray. Hopefully from Thai'd Up. If he had curry, she'd offer him double to leave it with her.

The blurred figure on the other side of the leaded glass was not a delivery man.

"Hi, Uncle Seamus."

"Where have you been? I've called and left messages here and on your cell, I sent you emails…nothing. I was beginning to think you'd run off with the Norseman." He winked.

Clearly, he thought himself amusing. She crossed her arms. “Hardly. I’ve been busy.”

“You’ve been busy? With what? Or shouldn’t I be askin’?” He laughed. “Can I come in or are you going to make your poor uncle stand outside all day?”

“Yes, you can come in. I’ve just had a lot on my mind is all.” Like a certain Viking who still deserved an apology.

Seamus made himself comfortable on the couch, so she joined him. He looked around and wrinkled his nose. “Have you given up on cleaning?”

She scooped up the empty ice cream carton, the sticky spoon, empty soda cans and food wrappers that littered the coffee table. Arms full, she headed for the kitchen. “Did you come over to comment on my housekeeping abilities or did you actually have a reason?”

“Now, don’t get yer knickers in a snit, love. The way you keep house is your business. And if himself doesn’t care, then more’s the merrier.” He laughed again and shook his head.

She stomped back into the living room. “For your information, *himself* hasn’t been here in days. And what makes you think I care what he thinks anyway?”

Her uncle’s brows shot up. “You two have a tiff? Tell me it isn’t so…”

“Why does it matter to you all of a sudden? Usually you and Uncle Corri are happy when the men in my life disappear.” *Disappear indeed. If only Seamus knew the truth of that.*

“Don’t tell me he’s gone.” He shook his head slowly.

“Why? What does it matter to you if he is?” She recrossed her arms, miffed by her uncle’s sudden interest in Alrik.

“What does it matter? My career is at stake here! Lass, the Uber Homme boys are throwin’ a grand party to announce their new campaign this Saturday night. And Alrik is the guest of honor. Give him a ring, will you love? I really need to speak with the lad.”

“He doesn’t have a phone.”

Seamus blew out a long breath. “Send him an email?”

“No computer.”

“Page him?”

“No pager, either.”

He strummed his fingers on the coffee table. “We’ll just have to pop by for a visit then.”

She shook her head while the color drained out of her uncle’s face.

“Why are you shaking your head? Don’t shake your head at me, Calleigh Siobhan McCarthy. I need him to be at this party or my reputation is ruined.” He crossed himself, then stood and paced the

room, wringing his hands.

"I can't go back to shooting corporate portraits and socialite weddings…I just can't."

He spun around to face her. "We'll go to the school. They'll know how to find him."

She shook her head again and dug her toe into the carpet. How was she going to explain what Alrik really was?

"No more headshaking! Why can't we go to the school? You said he was a student at NYU."

She wound a curl around her finger, tugging absently. "He's not really a student."

"What is he then? Is he an illegal alien? I don't care, the city's full of them." Seamus's eyes were a little wild now.

"I wouldn't exactly say he's an illegal alien."

"Merciful Joseph, lass! Quit talkin' in riddles and just tell me where to find the lad, will you?"

Calleigh moved so that the couch sat between herself and her uncle. "Well, see that's the thing. I don't really know where he is or how to get a hold of him."

* * *

"Remind me why I play Tabula with you." Marcus Augustus Vincentius sighed when he saw the three dice Alrik had thrown. A few of the other Phoenixes sitting in the courtyard smirked into their mugs before turning their attentions back to their own pastimes. Another pair played Senet. Some reclined under the massaging hands of Freya's hand maidens.

Ignoring the jest of the Roman, Alrik stayed silent as he moved his round markers on the board. His mind refused to let go of the way Calleigh had emphatically dismissed him. She had been livid, but how could she blame him? He had tried to explain. *Not hard enough. You should have protected her. You knew.*

"Daydreaming about something? Or someone?" the Centurion asked.

Torchlight glistened off the polished glass markers. Alrik finished his play and looked up. "What?"

"You of all people should know that women bring you nothing but trouble," Vincentius said. He drained his mug of ale without taking his eyes from the game.

"She is not trouble," Alrik gruffed.

"So there *is* a woman involved. I should have known." Vincentius swept his hand across the Tabula board, brushing the glass chips into

a neat pile. They clanked softly when he scooped them into a leather pouch. “We will play again when your mind is on the game. I do not want to take your money unfairly.”

Alrik shook his head. “I could beat you with one eye closed.”

“Then perhaps you should try that. You have yet to best me using both.” The Roman laughed and a few other Phoenixes joined in.

“It is just as well. I have had enough of games for now,” Alrik said.

Vincentius’s gaze traveled past Alrik and his voice lowered. “Then I suggest you take your leave. The goddess comes this way.”

“Is Eros with her?”

“Nay. She is alone. And I can think of other places I would rather be. Hail, brother.” Vincentius tucked the Tabula board beneath his arm and strode toward the arched passage that led to the Hall of Swords.

Not a bad idea, Alrik thought. A few rounds of swordplay might be just the thing to wear the tightness from his muscles.

He stood, rolling his shoulders like a man preparing for a brawl, which in a way, he was.

Freya’s thick perfume arrived before she did, a silent paean to her need. Her great blue cats accompanied her. They flanked her when she stopped in front of Alrik, lolling on the polished marble like sated dinner guests.

“Poor Phoenix,” Freya purred. She walked her fingers up his arm. “Your charge may not want you, but I do.”

He laughed and her brows inched up in surprise. “Is there a Phoenix you would not bed? You want me most because I want you least. Not a quality I desire in my women, goddess.”

Her perfume soured and the cats growled, showing teeth. She spoke loudly for obvious benefit of the audience around her. “You would rather want one who wants you not at all?”

A few of the gathered Phoenixes groaned.

Alrik looked around but not a single gaze met his. Every activity they were engaged in had just become of utmost importance. He did not blame them. Few wanted to cross Freya. A happy goddess was much easier to deal.

“She does want me and you know it,” he countered.

“I suppose that explains why she banished you here?” Her sticky sweet tone conveyed false pity.

“A change gone bad is not an easy thing to take. She is only hurt. She needs time to heal.”

“Perhaps Dagny was only hurt as well.” Freya adjusted the perfect pleats of her silk robe, studying the fabric with sudden interest. “Perhaps she also needed time to heal. Maybe someday you will find

out for yourself."

She glanced up and he knew by her pleased expression the anger on his face must be plainly readable. She brushed a curl from her cheek. "Although I think that day will be very long in coming."

* * *

Calleigh torched one of the talisman's wings with her long-stemmed candle lighter. She didn't really want to throw the thing back into the fireplace and fill her house with smoke but if she had to, she had to. She'd only persuaded Seamus to leave by promising him she'd get Alrik to the party or die trying.

The little flame had no effect on the wings.

She flicked the lighter off. Maybe it just needed more oomph. She adjusted the flame higher and turned the talisman around on the glass pie plate to look for the most combustible spot. Aha. Dark brown felt covered the base of the statue.

She tipped the talisman on its side and applied the lighter again. The felt caught fire but barely. Smoke snaked toward the ceiling in a sooty ribbon and the acrid smell of burning wool stung her nose.

"Ew!" She picked up the pie plate, headed for the kitchen window, unlatched the sash, pushed it up and started fanning.

Hopefully no one would see the smoke and think her house burning down. She didn't need a living room full of firemen when she was trying to summon Alrik.

The felt was still burning when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"I know what you're up to, Ms. McCarthy."

"So nice to hear from you, Mrs. Crouper." Calleigh knew immediately the smoke had not gone unnoticed.

"I can smell that wacky weed you're smoking! I will call the police if you don't—"

"Mrs. Crouper, please. It's just a little kitchen fire." Calleigh nudged the faucet on with her elbow and doused the talisman to put out the smoldering felt. She let the glass plate clatter into the sink.

"I know the smell of marijuana, Ms. McCarthy, and I best not smell it again."

Calleigh doubted the old woman knew the smell of anything besides Bengay and Preparation H. She rolled her eyes and gritted her teeth. "Kitchen fire's all out now. Good night, Mrs. Crouper."

She hung up. Apparently burning the talisman was now out of the question.

The carving lay on its side in a puddle of gray water. The

partially-burned felt peeled off the base where the heat had melted the glue.

She looked a little closer. There was something carved on the base beneath the felt.

Grabbing a dishtowel, she picked up the dripping statue and wiped it dry. It was still a little warm. She gingerly peeled off the remaining felt and took another look at the writing. Hadn't Alrik said something about an inscription when he'd first shown up?

What was that language? Latin? She tried to pronounce it.

"Ex cinis…cineris…in incendia." What a mouthful. Certainly twisted her tongue like Latin.

She tried it again, a little smoother this time. *"Ex cinis cineris, in incendia."*

No smoke. No flames. No Alrik.

She tried it once more, louder and with feeling. *"Ex cinis cineris, in incendia!"*

Nothing. Stupid inscription. It probably meant something like "if you can read this, thank your Latin teacher."

"You called?" Alrik's voice whispered in her ear, his breath warm on her neck.

Calleigh jumped even as shivers traveled over her skin.

The talisman went flying.

Alrik snatched it in midair and offered it back to her. "I apologize for startling you."

Her chest still heaving, she grabbed the talisman. The urge to punch him in the shoulder tempted her mightily. "What are you doing here? You scared the crap out of me. I asked you not to do that again."

"You summoned me. I came." He looked way too pleased with himself. Which on him was a very handsome look. Almost naughty. *Focus!*

"I wasn't trying to summon you," she lied. "Okay, I was." She lifted the carving. "I couldn't get this dumb thing to catch fire."

"My talisman is not dumb. And you did read the inscription, did you not?" He nodded toward the carving.

"Yes, but I read it three times. Why didn't you show up the first time? And what does it mean?" She turned it over to look at the words again.

"It means *out of ashes, into fire*. And you must read it three times for it to work. Now that you have summoned me, I am here." His smirk turned into a full-fledged smile. He stepped closer and rested his hands on the counter behind her so that she was trapped between his arms. "Did you miss me, Calleigh lass?"

Cinnamon invaded her brain. His mouth was only inches from

hers. “No. Yes. That’s not the point. I need you—”

“I know, and I am here now.” The dark rasp of his voice caressed her skin and her body tightened in response. He nuzzled her neck. “Just ask and I will give you pleasure like you have never known.”

Calleigh tried to back up but there was nowhere to go. “Hold your horses. This wasn’t some sort of mystic booty call. If you’d let me finish, I was about to tell you I need you to attend some big underwear party the Germans are throwing so my uncle doesn’t look like a fool.” His original offer made her thighs tingle. Pleasure like she’d never known? But that wouldn’t take much, would it?

“A party? You called me back for a party?” His smile was gone.

“No, not just a party.” She sighed, resigned to doing what had to be done. “I owe you an apology.”

She picked at her nail polish. “I know you were just doing your job. I’m sorry for yelling at you and ordering you to leave. It wasn’t very nice of me to talk to you that way.”

His voice hitched. “I am used to orders.”

“Doesn’t make it right. I’m sorry. I really am. No one should be spoken to that way, especially you.”

She glanced up and he turned away. She grabbed him and pulled him back around. His arms were hard and warm, the muscles tight beneath her grip. “Look at me.”

“See? More orders.” But he did as she asked.

His eyes glistened with moisture. Was he crying? This big hulking Viking beast? “Why are you crying?”

“I am not crying. Women cry, not warriors.” He stabbed at his chest. “I am a warrior.”

“It’s okay to cry, you know. Are you that upset with me? I did apologize.”

“I am not crying and I am not upset with you.” He twitched his nose and Calleigh thought he was probably moments away from a sniffle. It was quite possibly the cutest thing she’d ever seen. Who knew Vikings were so sensitive?

“If you aren’t upset, prove it.” She couldn’t help herself. His pleasure comment still rang in her ears. She just wanted a taste.

“How?” He looked suspicious.

“Kiss me.” Mercy. She was becoming as bold as Jeana.

Without hesitation he drew her into his arms, the warmth of his body igniting her the same way the lighter had lit the felt. If there were smoke rising off her, she wouldn’t have been surprised.

His mouth was sweeter than she remembered, his lips softer than the ones she’d kissed in her dreams.

She wove her fingers into his hair and laughter bubbled up inside her. She giggled against his mouth and he pulled away.

“Are you laughing at my kisses?”

She shook her head. “Not at. Actually, because of. Did I tell you to stop?”

“Orders, orders…” he muttered as he closed the gap between them again.

She melted against him. So what if she couldn’t keep him. She could at least enjoy him.

But her heart ached at the thought of this being temporary and she knew if she let herself feel what she was beginning to feel, the hurt when he left would crush her. Lost loves were nothing new to her but this one promised a whole new kind of pain.

His kiss deepened, as if he was trying to take her mind off the inevitable. His hands curved over the rise of her hips in a deliciously possessive hold.

She could quite possibly love this man to the end of her days. But would that love sustain her when he was just a memory or would it be the end of her? How much hurt could one person take in a lifetime?

Chapter Sixteen

They went to the mall the next day with the Uber Homme credit card Seamus had slipped into her hand before he'd left. Apparently the Germans wanted no expense spared when it came to Alrik looking good at their campaign party and since Seamus had told them Calleigh was Alrik's assistant, it was her job to make him look as good in clothes as he looked out of them.

Personally, she didn't think that would be hard to do.

Of course, Seamus had given her some suggestions and even offered to come along but she assured her uncle this was a job she could handle. And she planned on handling her assignment as often as possible.

Alrik seemed perfectly content to hold hands, and having his large hand surrounding her smaller one made her as giddy as a high school cheerleader. At least she imagined that's how high school cheerleaders felt. They certainly looked giddy.

He insisted on having a Cinnabon, so she took advantage of the situation when he finished and cleaned the stickiness off his mouth with her own. Who needed dessert when you had sugarcoated Viking on hand?

Public displays of affection didn't seem to bother him either.

By the time they entered the men's department at Nordstrom, Calleigh couldn't feel her feet touching the floor.

She picked out three of the most expensive Italian suits and sent Alrik into the dressing room to try them on with an equal selection of silk shirts.

Just because she didn't spend her own money didn't mean she wasn't good at spending someone else's. Besides, dressing Alrik was something she already knew she enjoyed. And although she had yet to try the reverse of that she had a feeling it would be a whole new level of enjoyment.

Parts of her warmed considerably at the thought. She fanned herself, sure that if he caught sight of her, he'd know exactly what she was thinking. And he'd want to do something about it.

But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, was it? How long could a girl hang on to her virginity before she ended up a lonely old maid in a big house with a herd of cats as her only companions?

She did her best not to remind herself that the house part already existed and one cat was really just the beginning of a collection.

Fortunately, Alrik stepped out of the dressing room at that moment and filled her head with thoughts of an entirely different nature.

My oh my.

The charcoal suit and black silk shirt were worth whatever their price tags read.

Yum.

"Does this please you?" Even though there were mirrors all around him, he looked only at her.

"Yeah. Oh yeah. That's good." She swallowed, walked over and adjusted his collar unnecessarily. He still smelled like the Cinnabon stand. Warm and sweet and spicy. The combination made her gooey inside.

"Would you like me to try on the others?"

Saints help her, she wanted in that dressing room. At these prices, she should be allowed. "Let's see what else you have in there. I can't really remember." *Only a partial lie*.

The salesman nodded as if he completely believed that's all she wanted to do. She smiled. *Gotta love Nordstrom. Customer service at its best.*

The dressing room was slightly larger than the average Manhattan apartment and definitely better furnished. A burgundy leather loveseat studded with antique nail heads provided seating. Maybe they *expected* company in these dressing rooms.

She rubbed the lapel of one of the remaining suits between her fingers. "I think you should try this one. Just to see."

Alrik watched her delicate fingers caress the clothing she had chosen for him. He could think of better places for her hands to be.

His arms found their way around her waist and she inhaled softly. She was warm and supple and let him pull her close.

"I like this," she whispered, her eyes closed, her cheek pressed against his chest.

"Aye, I like this as well." *Perhaps too much.* How could he turn away such sweetness? How could he ever leave this woman's side? And yet, he knew he would have to. She would eventually make her last change. Three days after that, he would kiss her goodbye, never to see her again.

Maybe he could persuade her not to make the last change. But that was interfering and Freya would never allow that. Neither would Eros, and he feared the wrath of the demi-god much more than he feared the goddess's, truth be told.

Freya might hold the power to transform a man into a Phoenix but Eros was her disciplinarian. On more than one occasion, Alrik had seen the goddess bend her will to suit Eros's. And Alrik was not the only Phoenix who suspected there was more to the demi-god than any of them knew.

Calleigh shifted in his arms, turning to look up at him. Thor's hammer, he could stare into those beautiful eyes all day. She traced the line of his cheekbone, trailing down to brush his lips with her fingers. "You're the most beautiful man I've ever seen. I can barely believe you're real sometimes."

He smiled and she buried her head against his chest so that he could not see her face. "I wish you weren't a Phoenix."

He pulled her back so he could see her. "Why do you wish that? We would never have met otherwise. Do you wish you had not met me?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." She fiddled with the suit collar. "I don't regret meeting you but I know you can't stay. Once I make that final change, you'll be gone, won't you?"

So that was what bothered her. The same thoughts that plagued him. Best she know the truth. "Aye. I cannot stay. There is nothing I can do about that and if you ask for that as your change, it will not be granted."

Her ragged exhale heated his skin.

He tipped her chin up and saw tears glimmering in her eyes. She turned her head, pulling away from his gentle grasp.

His heart ached knowing he was the cause of those tears. He hated himself for that, hated the helplessness he felt. There was nothing he could do to stay with her. Nothing. Even if he tried, Freya would snatch him back.

"Do not cry. Please. We should revel in the time we have left not sorrow for the future."

A weak smile curved her lush mouth. "I know. I'm just being foolish but I can't help it. Every good thing that comes into my life always gets taken away. It isn't fair."

He thought of her family, her beautiful home, even her little cat and knew that was not true but he understood. She was talking about him.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

She shrugged and smiled a little bigger but still unconvincingly. "It's not your fault."

"I hate to keep asking but I have no choice and I want so badly to ki—"

"Then kiss me," she interrupted. "That's an order. And from now on, you have permission to kiss me and touch me whenever you want."

He wasted no time in obeying and squeezed her against him. She grabbed hold of him, clutching him like she thought he might leave at that exact moment. The gentle grip of her warm hands on his biceps tortured the rest of his body with need. He wanted this woman not

just for his own but for always. She was right. Life was not fair. A weaker man would have joined her in her tears.

Her soft lips opened against his, welcoming his kiss. She moaned when their lips met, inviting his kiss deeper. The sweet taste of her mouth heightened his own need, increasing his desire to make her his own.

He splayed his fingers possessively over the curve of her hips and tugged her closer. He wanted her to feel the way she affected him, to know the power she had over him was not just the power a charge wielded with her Phoenix but the power of a woman over a man. She swayed him to the core of his being and he wanted her to know it.

Her heat swept through him. Wanton desire played at the edge of his senses like a siren's call beckoning him to take more. He knew if he did not retreat from her now, he would break his oath as a Phoenix so instead he broke the kiss.

The need pulsing in his veins made him tip his head back and gasp for control. But she held him just as tightly and nibbled on his newly exposed skin, teasing her mouth down to the hollow of his neck.

He pushed her away, panting with want he could barely contain. The woman undid him.

Desire flushed her cheeks and this time, her smile was genuine. "What's wrong? Don't you like kissing me?"

Swallowing hard and thinking of Freya in an attempt to quench the fire in his loins, he shook his head at Calleigh's naughty grin. "You know what you do to me. You are a wicked wench to be sure."

"I was just trying to enjoy the moment. It was your idea." She laughed, fluttering her eyes with feigned innocence.

"A few more enjoyable moments like that and Freya will have my head. You know I cannot interfere."

"Unless I command it, I know." She grinned a little bigger and closed the distance between them. "But I asked. And I'm about to ask for more."

Chapter Seventeen

European house music blared from the club the Germans had rented out for their campaign party. Calleigh stayed close behind Alrik as he cleared a way through the horde clustered outside the velvet stanchions.

She watched the women in the crowd. They stared at Alrik, nodding and smiling, heads swiveling to get a better look at her Viking. They whispered to their friends, giggling like teenagers and pointing. Calleigh wanted to smack them.

She squeezed his hand a little tighter. He looked back and gave her a smile, freeing his hand from hers to pull her closer and put her in front of him. He rested his hands possessively on her hips and nuzzled a kiss against her neck.

Goose bumps danced over her skin and she grinned. *Take that, underwear groupies!*

The massive espresso-skinned bald man guarding the door nodded with recognition when he saw Alrik and held open the ropes for them. He stuck out his hand and a thick diamond bracelet slid out from beneath the cuff of his black leather jacket.

“Hey man, nice pics. You’re gonna have chicks after you like fat kids after cake.”

Alrik smiled and shook the doorman’s hand but Calleigh knew he probably didn’t have a clue what the guy was talking about.

Strobe lights and swirling lasers pierced the dark with bursts of brilliant color, pulsing in time with the heavy thumping beat that vibrated right through her chest.

Alrik looked around, obviously fascinated by the colors, sounds and people. To his credit, he didn’t linger on the scantily dressed cocktail waitresses any longer than the purple-mohawked bartender or the enormous aquarium full of small sharks that made up the back wall behind the bar.

Several long seconds of staring and Calleigh realized she was eye level with a cotton-ribbed covered crotch. Alrik’s crotch to be exact. Huge blow-ups of his ad hung on every wall. Apparently the Germans didn’t believe in subtlety.

This was further re-enforced by the large white cubes placed strategically throughout the club. Atop the cubes, which were actually lit platforms, stood what could only be described as a male go-go dancers, wearing nothing but Uber Homme briefs and a pout. Thank God the Germans hadn’t wanted Alrik to do that.

The place teemed with hot bodies. Probably every model in Manhattan was here. Tall, leggy blondes and heart-stoppingly

beautiful men stood around in clusters, chatting and posing with their drinks. She hadn't seen so much black clothing since her mother's funeral. She smoothed the skirt of her emerald green wrap dress and felt hopelessly out of place.

Seamus waved to her as he made his way through the crowd. He had probably been watching for them, nervous as a nun on a nude beach that they wouldn't show. He kissed Calleigh's cheek.

"So glad you made it, lass. I see you've made friends again with our lad. Lovely." He winked, raising his brows at Alrik and Calleigh's clasped hands.

"Yes, we're friends again." She kissed him back. "So glad you approve."

He clapped Alrik on the back. "Enjoy yourself for a bit but don't go too far. The boys aren't here yet—" he rolled his eyes, "—they like to be fashionably late. Once they arrive, be prepared. That's when this stops being a party and starts being work. Lots of press to talk to, pictures to pose for, hands to shake, babies to kiss, that sort of thing. Have some fun, I'll be back for you in a bit."

Once Seamus had disappeared back into the crowd, Alrik bent his head to Calleigh's ear. "I do not mind kissing them but who would bring babies to a place like this?"

She laughed. "It's just an expression."

They headed toward the bar and a large figure stepped in front of them. The man was a head taller than Alrik, just as broad and almost as handsome. He had chiseled features and dark wavy hair. If it weren't for his beautiful suit and sparkling gold watch, Calleigh would have figured him for a bouncer. Maybe he was a model, too.

"You Vikings always have such a hard time keeping your clothes on?"

Alrik smirked. "No toga, Vincentius? Or have you decided the attire of the masses suits you better?"

The man shook his head and smiled at Calleigh. "My apologies for my friend. He has no manners. I am Vincentius, one of Alrik's… brothers."

She looked at Alrik. "Your brother?"

"Not by blood. Vincentius is a Phoenix." He glanced around the club. "There are quite a few here tonight."

"Really?" She strained to look, even though she didn't know what she was looking for. "Who? Which ones? Why are they here? Do they usually hang out in clubs?"

Vincentius laughed. "I see you have your hands full, my friend."

"I'm just very curious is all." She studied the new Phoenix. Freya had great taste in men.

Vincentius smiled. "Curiosity is not such a bad thing."

Calleigh frowned and addressed both men. “If you can show up here, why not just poof back to your own time and fix what’s wrong? Wouldn’t that be the easy way?”

Vincentius answered. “A Phoenix may only walk the mortal world where another Phoenix has been called. And we rarely have reason. But with an occasion such as this…”

He glanced at one of the looming ads, eyebrows raised. “We could not let our brother celebrate his *achievement* alone, could we?”

“So are you a Viking too?”

“Hah! Not hardly.” He leaned closer, his eyes twinkling, his voice thick with pride. “I am a Roman Centurion, a swordsman with no equal, feared among men and greatly desired among women.”

Alrik pulled Calleigh next him and kept his arm around her waist.

She looked over at her Viking, noting his clenched jaw and glinting eyes. Was he jealous? Did he think Vincentius was coming on to her? Warmth spread through the lower half of her body. She turned back to Vincentius. “So you don’t have any real skills then?”

The Centurion turned purple. He opened his mouth to reply then snapped it shut and stalked off, shaking his head. Alrik threw his head back and laughed. He wiped a tear from his eye and kissed her hard on the mouth. “I think I love you.”

“What?” Calleigh’s mouth hung open but she didn’t care. Her head spun and the warmth in her belly blossomed into genuine heat. “You think you love me?”

He wrapped his arms around her and bent his head so their foreheads touched. The noise and lights and chaos around them disappeared. “I do not *think* I love you.”

Her heart sank.

He kissed the tip of her nose. “I know I do. I did not mean to tell you here, though. It just slipped out.”

If not for his arms holding her up, she would have melted to the floor.

“You love me?” Her voice came out weak and wavery but it was the best she could do. He loved her. This incredible man loved her. Down deep beneath the Brad-barrier covering her heart she suspected she might love him too. She just wasn’t sure enough to say it back.

“I don’t know if I love you yet. It’s too soon for me. I’m sorry.” She wanted to say it, she really did. Just not yet.

He shrugged gently. “Do not be sorry. It is better if you do not love me. Then you will not miss me when I am gone.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” Or think about it. She was plenty aware that her last change hung over her like one of Alrik’s massive ads, impossible to ignore. But this was the story of her life, she should expect it by now. Love always left.

“Nor do I.” He released her from his arms but kept one hand on the small of her back. “Would you like to meet a few more of my brothers? I would be proud to introduce you.”

Charmed by the events of the entire night, she just nodded and let him lead her. He loved her and wanted to introduce her to his friends. He didn’t even seem to care that she hadn’t responded in kind to his admission. How much better could her night get?

She’d only met a few of the other impressively handsome Phoenixes when Seamus came to collect Alrik. Vincentius, seemingly over his indignation, had rejoined them.

“All right, lad. Let’s go schmooze. Calleigh, as soon as the press bit is over, I’ll send Leona to get you so you can join us.”

Alrik flashed a look at the Centurion she didn’t understand. “Keep an eye on her.”

“I don’t need anyone to watch me, I’m not twelve. Now go and be fabulous.” She kissed his cinnamon-scented mouth before he left, raising her uncle’s eyebrows once again.

How would she explain his disappearance to her family once he was gone? They would think she’d picked another loser and she didn’t want them to think of him that way. She wouldn’t be able to stand it if they ran him down in front of her. Maybe she could say his student visa ran out?

But Seamus already knew the truth of that. Alrik was no student. She sighed deeply. So much to think about.

“You love him.” Vincentius’s words pulled her back to the present.

“What?”

“I have seen many women watch their men going off to war. The look in their eyes is always the same. I see it in your eyes now.”

She stared at her drink. “That’s silly. Alrik isn’t going off to war.”

“But he will be leaving.” Vincentius shifted to lean against the bar. “There is no shame in loving the Viking. He is a good man. If you love him, you should tell him, before you no longer have the chance.”

She glanced at the Centurion. There was no judgment in his eyes. “I don’t know if I love him yet. I haven’t had great success with love in the past. I want to be sure this time.”

“That I understand.” A cloud of emotion crossed the Phoenix’s face, disappearing as quickly as it had arrived. “Just do not wait too long. You know he cannot stay.”

She twirled the swizzle stick in her club soda. “Yeah, I know. But I don’t want to think about that right now.”

“Think about it soon. If Freya has her way, she’ll confine him to Valhalla again until his talisman is next found.”

Vincentius introduced her to a few more Phoenixes and kept her engaged with light conversation. She got the distinct feeling he was taking the "keeping watch over her" thing too seriously. She excused herself to the ladies room, but not before he made her promise to return immediately. Who did this guy think he was? She nodded but kept her fingers crossed.

Once out of sight, she slipped away, down to another section of the club called The Vault. The building the club was in had once been a bank and the vault really had been just that. Beyond the heavy steel door and large bolts, the room was surprisingly spacious. A DJ spun thickly-layered rhythms, their pulse hypnotically timed to the violet light strobing the air.

Swaying softly she danced by herself, eyes closed, letting the magnetic beats flow through her. Her body wanted to move but she didn't want to miss Leona when the girl came to get her. She wanted to be with Alrik as much as she could. Her head bobbed in time to the music. Leona could find her on the dance floor, couldn't she?

A warm hand on her arm drew her out of her thoughts. She turned. Even in the dim light of the vault, the blue eyes she looked into were astoundingly brilliant.

"I am Dimitri. You are Alrik's charge, are you not?"

"Yes, I am. Are you…"

"A Phoenix? Yes." He smiled. "I can see why the Viking is so taken with you. You are quite a fair creature."

She felt her face flush and hoped it wasn't noticeable under the pulsing club lights. These Phoenixes sure had unusual taste in women. "Thank you, that's very kind of you."

He tossed a head full of cornsilk curls and smiled. "Would you mind if I danced with you? I love this modern music."

"Sure, why not?" One dance and then she'd head back up to look for Leona. It wasn't every day a hot guy was willing to dance. Would Alrik dance with her? That would be nice, pressed against him—

"What is your name, little one?"

Little one? The endearment made her grin. The lighting in the club must be worse than she thought if this guy was calling her little. "Calleigh."

"Calleigh." He repeated, rolling her name off his tongue so sweetly she smiled again. Maybe there was some sort of Phoenix charm school these guys went to.

They started dancing. She was impressed. For a guy she assumed was at least several hundred years old, he could move. "You're pretty good."

"Thank you, so are you. Very graceful."

Graceful? Imagine that. "I used to teach dance. Irish step

dancing."

Dimitri nodded. "Your training shows."

"Thanks." Sweat trickled down her back. "I think that's enough for me, I'm getting hot." The last thing she wanted was runny mascara.

She started for the door but he caught her hand.

"Just a little while longer. I have not had such a wonderful partner in many years."

Those blue eyes were so intense. It was hard to look away. "Okay, just a few more minutes."

He smiled and spun her, pulling her close against him with a laugh.

The beat took over and she lost herself in the dance until he twined his fingers with hers playfully. "You are so lovely, Calleigh. The kind of woman who deserves so much out of life."

She just smiled, feeling slightly awkward and not knowing how to respond to his compliments. But she felt no reason to pull away. He was a Phoenix and they considered themselves brothers, didn't they?

His hands slid down to her hips. Distant alarms went off in her head but she silenced them. It was just dancing right? And it felt so good to be wanted.

Warm breath tickled her neck, his lips brushed against her skin. "You smell so good, little one."

Slightly dizzy from the heat, she looped her hands around his neck to steady herself. He smelled good too and those eyes…

"Yes, put your arms around me, little one." And then, he kissed her.

His lips were warm and soft but demanding. The alarm bells sounded again, this time louder.

He was kissing her without permission. And she was liking it.

Startled, she pulled back. "You can't do that unless I ask."

He stared into her eyes. "Feel down deep and you will see you wanted that very much. You enjoy dancing with me, letting me touch you. Look deeper and you will find an even greater desire for me."

She tried to look away but couldn't. Those eyes. Her body responded to his words but something wasn't right. She needed to get away. He shouldn't have his hands on her. Anger flared along her spine.

"I have to go to the bathroom but I'll be right back, I promise." She tugged out of his grasp and the moment his hands were off her, a cold chill swept through her.

What had just happened? How had he been able to kiss her without her permission? And why had it felt okay? She shivered and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. The thought of Dimitri's

kiss grossed her out. She wanted to scrub every inch of her skin.

She needed Alrik, whether he was done with the press or not. Something weird was going on. With a glance behind to make sure Dimitri wasn't following, she headed up the wide granite stairs to the third floor of the club.

A throng of people went by, her uncle in the midst of them.

"Seamus!"

He turned at her call. "There you are. Did Alrik find you? I was going to send Leona but he insisted on going himself."

"I'm trying to find him. Is he still on the third floor?"

Seamus shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. If I see him I'll tell him you're looking for him."

She kept moving towards the top, figuring she'd start there and work her way down. Having a few floors between her and Dimitri seemed like a good plan anyway.

Based on the heavy wood paneling and brass light fixtures, the third floor had probably been meeting rooms and offices at one time. Now, the large front room was decorated like a hunt club, complete with billiard table and mounted animal heads. Thick velvet curtains and an equally thick bouncer delineated the VIP loft. If Alrik was in there, she'd need Seamus's help to find him.

She kept going, passing through a huge white-tiled bathroom, sinks and toilets still intact, that served as the third floor's main bar.

Beyond that, more converted office space. The walls had been taken down and the mammoth room converted into a giant, communal bedroom. Five white-canopied beds were spaced around the room. Groups of people sat chatting and drinking on the beds like it was the most normal thing they'd ever done in their lives.

She hurried past each bed, checking for Alrik. Not there. She continued on to the second floor.

The offices here had been stripped and turned into mini-lounges in shades of plum and burgundy and cerulean. Instead of walking through them, she scanned each one from the long hall that connected the rooms with a back staircase that offered another route to the first or third floors.

She had just checked the last office when she heard laughter coming from the backstairs. She stuck her head through the door to get a better listen.

Between the stair railings, she saw a couple standing on the next flight of stairs down. The man's back was to her but she knew it was Alrik. The smell of cinnamon was intense. The blonde she didn't recognize.

The chill she'd felt from Dimitri's kiss returned. The woman was breathtakingly beautiful. Thick ropes of pale blonde hair cascaded

over her shoulders in perfect ringlets. Her eyes were the same startling blue as Dimitri's and her porcelain skin shone like moonlight.

The woman's laugh was lush and musical. Calleigh wondered what the joke was. Alrik put his hands on his hips and shook his head. She wished she could see his face.

As the woman's laugh faded, she stepped closer to Alrik. He dropped his hands to his sides but didn't move away. The woman traced her finger down his arm, saying something Calleigh couldn't hear. The look in the woman's eyes was perfectly readable. She was hungry and Viking was the meal she was after.

Alrik shook his head again and replied but his deep voice was lost in the thumping beat of the music.

Calleigh leaned over the railing as much as she dared. The lighting wasn't so great but the woman's eyes looked like they'd gotten a little brighter. Maybe even like they were glowing slightly. Weird.

The blonde's hands cupped Alrik's face. He made no move to pull away and the ache in Calleigh's gut amped up. *I should have told him I loved him.*

The woman smiled, her eyes sparkling. She leaned into Alrik and kissed him.

The kiss hit Calleigh like a punch to the stomach. She choked out an exhale and the woman's eyes opened. She looked up, making eye contact with Calleigh without taking her mouth off the Viking.

Calleigh jerked back. She'd seen enough. Her stomach heaved. She was going to be sick.

Why didn't I tell him I loved him back? He must be hurt. Angry. She reeled down the hall, blinded to everything else going on around her. Would it have mattered if she'd said the words? She'd said them to Brad and it hadn't made any difference to him.

Maybe Alrik didn't really love her. Maybe he said that to all his charges. Maybe he was just trying to get a request for sexual favors out of her.

She pressed her hands over her face. Had he seen Dimitri kissing her? She hadn't wanted the other Phoenix to kiss her, hadn't asked. He'd just done it. Surely Alrik would know she'd never ask another… why would he do this to her? Especially after all she'd been through with Brad.

Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on you. Maybe Alrik was no different than Brad. Just using her to get what he wanted. Well, she could think of one thing Alrik didn't want and he was about to get it. Calleigh was done being everyone's fool. She took a deep breath and calmed herself enough to deal with the trip home.

It was time to make her third change.

The subway clacked and rumbled over the tracks, the lights flickering as they rode home. Calleigh was much quieter than Alrik could remember her being. Maybe she was tired. It was just as well. Freya's ambush on the stairs had not put him in a good mood. He could still taste her sickening kiss. Undoubtedly, she would punish him for shoving her away but he would deal with that when the time came. Right now, he just wanted to rid himself of her memory and concentrate on the incredible woman beside him.

"Are you tired, Calleigh lass?"

"Yes." She answered without looking at him. Actually, she had not looked at him since they left the club. And she had barely spoken to him since she had insisted they leave. Perhaps someone had said something to upset her. The thought angered him. He would gladly pummel anyone who had ruined her evening.

Perhaps her tiredness was why she'd been so short with him. Of course, if he fully understood women, Dagny probably would never have gotten the best of him. Maybe it was Calleigh's time of the month. That could be. Women often got upset during that time. At least he knew not to ask about that.

Whatever the case, he would find a way to make her smile when they got home. If she wanted to be held, he would wrap his arms around her for as long as she desired. If she wanted to be kissed, he would relish the chance to replace the feel of Freya's lips with Calleigh's sweet ones. If she wanted to relax in a hot bath, he would fill the tub himself and wash her hair.

He smiled to himself. Love had turned him into weak-kneed boy and he did not care. This woman was worth all the taunts the other Phoenixes might throw his way.

She was even worth the pain that losing her would cause. He would carry the memories of her for the rest of his days, wherever they might take him.

Of course, she had not said she loved him, but he understood. He could wait for her to be ready.

She shot a quick glance in his direction. "Quit staring at me, would you?"

"As you wish." Poor lass. Obviously, she was in serious need of care.

They walked home from the subway stop in silence but he let her be. The thin line of her mouth made him wonder if she was in some sort of pain.

She went to her room immediately after they entered the house. He sat on the couch, petting the cat, wondering if he should do something. He did not like seeing her this way and he did not like

feeling helpless.

A few moments later, she came back into the room. This time she looked directly at him. The look on her face set him on edge. His warrior instincts told him something bad was about to happen.

"I'm going to say something and I don't want you to interrupt me. Don't say a word. I mean it. I need to get this off my chest before I blow up. Do you understand?"

He nodded. Nay. This did not bode well.

"When you told me you loved me tonight, I was thrilled. Thrilled! I couldn't say it back because I just wasn't sure what I was feeling. Like, yes. Enjoy, yes. But love? Love and I don't do well." She fisted her hands against her sides, her knuckles white.

"You're an incredible looking guy. I mean, there were a lot of hot guys at that club tonight, including all your Phoenix buddies and I still didn't see one I thought was better looking than you. Not one. Even Brad is just neatly packaged average next to you.

"I wanted to be sure that I wasn't just attracted to you because of your looks. That's okay for a while, but looks don't last. Not that it matters, you can't stay anyway." She paused for a moment and rubbed her face with her hands.

"There seemed to be so much more to you than looks. You seemed like a genuinely nice guy. I really thought you could be the one."

She shook her head. "So stupid of me. So typical. Pick a guy you can't have." She put her face into her hands then pushed her hair back and stared at him.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why did you kiss her? If you really, truly loved me and weren't just trying to butter me up in hopes of getting laid, why did you kiss her?" She was weeping softly now.

Loki take him, she had seen Freya's kiss. He opened his mouth to defend himself, to explain, but nothing came out. Of course. She had commanded he not say a word.

He shook his head in silence. This could not be happening.

"Had to be a blonde, too, didn't it? After everything with Jeana, you had to pick a blonde? Why couldn't you be honest with me?" She scrubbed the tears off her cheek with a fist.

"And to think… I was going to ask you into my bed tonight." She shook her head, tears flowing freely. "I'm such a fool."

He cursed Freya. When he returned to Valhalla, she would see the extent of his wrath, consequences be damned. It matter less to him that the goddess had kissed him than it did that Calleigh had been hurt because of it. For that, he would not forgive Freya.

If only he could speak, he could explain. He was sure Calleigh did not realize she had silenced him with her command.

There was only one thing he could think of doing. The one thing he had vowed never to do for another woman again so long as he breathed.

He sank to his knees and stretched out his hands towards her in supplication, hoping she would see and understand.

For only the second time in his life, he begged.

Chapter Eighteen

Calleigh backed away. “Don’t. You’re not going to change my mind. I’m not going through this again. I’m done with men. Done with love. My heart can’t take it.”

Alrik closed his eyes and hung his head, his anger at Freya boiling his blood. He was going to lose this woman because of the goddess’s conniving ways.

“I’m still not sure if I love you. Or loved you. Whatever. Maybe I did. Or do. I don’t know. It really doesn’t matter anymore.” An eerie calm settled into her voice. “I will tell you that I enjoyed your company. At least until you kissed that woman. Anyway, I think it’s best for both of us if I make my last change now.”

That raised his head. He wanted to speak so badly, to shout that it was Freya’s doing, to explain that he did truly love her, to beg her not to make this last change. He was not ready to leave. He shook his head, pleading with his eyes.

“Don’t worry. I think you’ll find my last change to your liking. I’m giving it to you, so you can go back to your time and get the vengeance you want so badly.”

His jaw dropped. She was giving it to him?

“Get up, please.” She touched his shoulder, briefly. “I don’t want to remember you this way.”

He stood as she asked. His hands trembled with rage, his heart ached with anticipated loss. This was not how their day of parting should be. He studied her beautiful face, memorizing it so he could recall it in his dreams.

“Alrik Gunn, I command you take my third and last change and use it to regain your life. I give you this change freely. Those are my final words.”

Unbidden, the wings of fire sprang from his back. He welcomed the searing heat, the brief, torturous burn. His scars throbbed with fresh pain but this torment ran deeper than Dagny’s blade.

Calleigh’s image wavered as the flames rose up around him. He snatched her hand and pressed it to his lips for one last taste of her before the fire of the Phoenix took him back to Valhalla.

Calleigh’s hand burned with the kiss Alrik had seared upon her skin. Nothing remained of him but the circle of ashes.

Her legs buckled and a sharp pain radiated through her knees as she hit the floor.

An ache like she’d never felt before ripped through her, doubling her over. Tears blurred her vision. He was gone. Without a word to

defend himself, he was gone.

She slammed her fist against the floor. It was her own fault he hadn't spoken. She'd told him not to say a word.

She opened her mouth to scream but only a sob came out. Weeping, she collapsed and pressed the back of her hand to her lips. The scent of cinnamon lingered on her skin.

"I do love you, you stupid cheating Viking," she moaned, slumping down on the floor. "What have I done?" But he would return in three days, wouldn't he? She prayed that was true.

The coolness of the parquet eased the flush of her skin. She lay there, thinking about all that had passed between them the last few days. It only made her feel worse.

Snickers meowed.

"Don't you start with me. I can't take it right now."

He sat and stared at her, his gold eyes unblinking.

She turned to get away from Snicker's unrelenting gaze and saw the talisman on the breakfast bar.

Hope tingled along her spine. She hopped up and grabbed the bird.

The heaviness felt good in her hands, the warmth of the carving reassuring. She flipped it over and held it in the light.

"Ex cinis cineris, in incendia. Ex cinis cineris, in incendia. Ex cinis cineris, in incendia."

A hopeful half-smile curved her mouth as she glanced around the room for a wisp of smoke or a burst of flame.

Minutes ticked by. Nothing.

She read the inscription three times again, louder, with more seriousness.

The room stayed empty.

Maybe the third time's the charm. She read again, this time slower and with better enunciation.

Snickers scratched his ear and burped.

"I know it's not working, you don't have to be rude."

Think think think. Only one thing came to mind. Mrs. Crouper would not be pleased. Calleigh could live with that.

She cranked on the gas. The fire jumped to life with a happy whoosh. When the logs had just begun to glow, she pitched the talisman in and sat back to wait.

Slowly, small wisps of smoke trickled off the carving. Drifts of sooty gray crawled over the mantel and up to the ceiling. She moved back a bit, heady with anticipation. It was working!

The cloud of smoke expanded, flattened out against the ceiling, and melted into nothingness. She stared at the ceiling in disbelief.

When she looked back at the fireplace, the talisman just sat there.

No smoke, no charred edges. Nothing. It wasn't burning.

She groaned and turned off the gas. "Crap. I can't believe I had three chances to change my life and now I'm more miserable than ever."

The phone rang. She had a pretty good idea of who it was.

"Hello?"

"I smell that wacky smoke again, Ms. McCarthy, and I am not happy."

The wretched old biddy had a nose like a bloodhound on steroids. "Hello to you too, Mrs. Crouper."

"I'm serious this time. I'm calling the police. Your parents would be turning in their graves if they knew—"

"Okay, Adalaide, listen up and listen good. I am not smoking marijuana. I'm actually trying to conjure up a twelve-hundred-year-old Viking and if you ever mention my parents to me that way again, I'll tell the lawyer across the street that you're the one who never cleans up after her dog when it poops in front of his Porsche. Do we have an understanding?"

Dead silence answered Calleigh, followed shortly by a dial tone. She replaced the receiver with a satisfying click. Apparently abandonment was good for the backbone.

Rotten for the soul, though. She climbed the stairs to the guest room where Alrik had been sleeping. Draped across the foot of the bed were his jeans and T-shirt.

She sat on the bed, gathered the T-shirt to her face and inhaled. His warm, spicy scent brought new tears. She sprawled back on the quilt. The pillow smelled like him too.

I can't believe he's gone. I don't even care that he kissed another woman. I want him back. At least so he can explain why he kissed that other woman.

She might never see him again. The thought was too much to comprehend. She covered herself with his T-shirt, curled into a ball and wept herself to sleep.

The next morning, wearing sunglasses to hide her puffy eyes, she left the house long enough to stock up on cinnamon-scented candles and chocolate-peanut butter ice cream.

On her way home, she saw Mrs. Crouper walking her dog on the other side of the street. Plastic baggies hung out of the woman's coat pocket. For a brief moment, Calleigh smiled.

She spent the rest of the day watching an endless string of sappy old movies, sniffling at the misfortunes of others in an effort to forget her own. Camped on the couch, she ate ice cream for breakfast, lunch and dinner while the cinnamon candles burned down to their bases.

The phone rang but she let the machine pick it up. It wasn't like

Alrik was going to call.

"Calleigh me love, it's your Uncle Seamus. I'm sure you and the lad are occupied so I won't expect you to answer. Just let him know the party was a success. This campaign is going to be huge. The Germans are already making plans for the next one. Yer boy is going to be a star! I think you've really got yourself a winner, lovey. Talk to you soon."

How was she ever going to explain Alrik being gone to her uncle? She finished the last of the ice cream. Seamus would have a fit.

By nightfall, she was sick of being brokenhearted. She studied the ring of ashes on her floor, thought about getting the dustpan then changed her mind. She took a hot shower and went to bed, determined not to think about Alrik.

But her dreams had other plans.

He came to her, as bronze and beautiful as ever, professing his love with kisses and caresses. She woke up hot and needy and wanting. When she finally fell back to sleep, she dreamed of him again. This time, the vision was darker.

She stood between Alrik and Dagny, who looked and sounded remarkably like Jeana. Alrik demanded Calleigh get behind him but she refused. Dagny laughed, taunting Calleigh for being short and dark-haired and in love with a cheater. She threatened Calleigh with a gold sword that bore the intertwined Chanel C's on its hilt.

Daylight did not come soon enough.

She struggled through the morning like a person bicycling through molasses. It was pointless and she went nowhere. Nothing made her mood any better. And she was out of ice cream.

One look in the mirror and all thoughts of leaving the house vanished.

"Well, you look like crap warmed over. Time to get yourself together. He's not coming back. Deal with it. Besides, he kissed another woman. He cheated on you."

Did he? He was my Phoenix, not my boyfriend. And I didn't tell him I loved him. Even though I do.

She pressed her palms into her eyes until she saw stars. Did you know when you were going crazy? What were the warning signs of a mental breakdown?

Things had to get better as some point.

She fed Snickers, downed a cup of instant coffee then forced herself into a piping hot shower. Today would not be a repeat of yesterday.

The shower helped. Clean clothes helped too. Looking at the mess she'd left from yesterday motivated her to clean.

Three hours, two rolls of paper towels and half a bottle of Spray-

n-Shine later and the entire house was spotless. Except for the circle of ashes on her living room floor.

She just couldn't bring herself to vacuum that up. Maybe tomorrow but definitely not today. Not yet. *Maybe not ever.*

The fridge was still empty, except for some old containers of now inedible takeout and a case of diet Pepsi.

She could walk to Little Joe's Diner but the last time she'd been there, she'd been with Alrik. There were other places to eat.

Take out sounded like a great idea but the sun was shining and the fresh air would probably do her some good. She ruffled Snicker's fur and laced up her sneakers.

The walk down to Lenny's Deli helped her feel hungry. Daffodils were blooming in the park across the street so she ordered a sandwich to go and sat in the sun.

She didn't mind the noise from the kids on the swings. It was a happy sound. Laughter mostly. Parents stood around chatting. Other people walked by with their dogs. Getting out of the house had been a good decision.

At least until a huggy, kissy couple sat on the bench across from hers.

Her mouth went dry. Her bite of sandwich turned to sawdust. How was she supposed to eat when they were sucking each other's face off? Why did they have to be in love in front of everyone? Didn't they know how sad her life was?

She tossed the remainder of her sandwich in the trash and headed home. On the way, she stopped at the Korean grocery.

Frosty pints of Häagen Dazs beckoned to her from their neat little rows on the shelf in the glass-front freezer. Strawberry Cheesecake, Triple Chocolate, Coffee, Cherry Vanilla, Bananas Foster and her arch nemesis, Chocolate Peanut Butter. Her hand gripped the freezer handle.

Then let it go.

She couldn't feel sorry for herself for the rest of her life. She bought an apple and ate it on the way home.

Dreams of Alrik filled her sleep again and when she woke, her sheets were damp with the heat of desire. She closed her eyes, not ready to leave the dream behind. Wanton energy coursed through over her skin.

She bolted upright. She couldn't spend the day carrying this much pent-up need. There was only one way to deal with it, only one way to get it out of her system.

She hadn't done it in a long time. Well, not done it properly anyway. But now seemed like the right time.

Making the bed could wait. She pulled on some yoga pants, a

sports bra and the T-shirt of Alrik's she'd been sleeping with and headed to the one room of the house she hadn't been in for the last six months. Her mother's studio.

She needed to dance.

And the studio needed a thorough cleaning. Dust motes floated in the shafts of sun shining in from the street level windows. The natural light lit the studio well enough so she left the fluorescents off. She stood with her eyes closed in the middle of the polished wood floor and let the old familiar smells wash over her.

White Shoulders, her mother's favorite perfume, lingered in the air. The subtle tang of perspiration and leather was there too. It was a familiar and pleasant mix that tugged at Calleigh's emotions.

Her shoes were on the shelf were she'd left them. The last time she'd worn them, tears had blurred her vision. Giving up the studio had been easier than dealing with the daily reminder that her mother was gone.

When her shoes were on, she walked to the stereo system. The soft tap of her heels on the floor made her smile. She selected one of her favorite reels and slid the CD into the player.

She tapped back to the center of the floor and waited for the first plaintive strains of the fiddles. Spine straight. Shoulders back. Head up. Keep the body proud. Her mother's voice echoed in her head.

The music swept through her. Her feet moved of their own accord. The staccato rap of her steps joined the beat of the reel and filled the studio with the sound of life.

Too long she'd ignored the need to dance. Too long she'd been afraid to deal with her mother's death.

Her feet flew as she kicked and twisted across the floor. The notes pulsed in her veins like a second heart. Sweat drenched the back of her neck. She pulled Alrik's T-shirt off and leapt into the air. The sheer joy of dancing again filled her with happiness.

Faster. Harder. Higher. She skimmed across the entire studio, almost flying. Her breath came in little pants and her lungs ached but she refused to stop until the fiddles did.

At last, the final notes echoed through the empty space and the reel ended. She collapsed, shaking and spent and the happiest she'd been in many months. Her mother would be proud. She glanced heavenward and smiled.

"I shouldn't have given it up. I shouldn't have closed the studio," she panted.

"I'm sorry, Mom. But I'm ready now. I'm ready to dance again." She lay back against the wood floor, relishing its coolness on her sweaty skin.

If only she had her Viking. Everything would be perfect.

* * *

When the flames vanished, Alrik stood in the Hall of Fire, the place in Valhalla where every Phoenix returned to make changes. He was as stunned, as if he had been hit broadside by an unexpected blow. Calleigh had sent him away thinking he had betrayed her and there was nothing he could do to change that.

His heart ached so badly he wanted to rip it from his chest. The knowledge that sweet, beautiful Calleigh had been hurt felt like a deathblow. There was only one solution his throbbing brain could think of.

Freya must die.

Somewhere, in the small part of his brain where rational thought still existed, he knew the impossibility of this. And what it would cost him.

He could not find a reason to care.

The Hall of Swords rang with the clink and clang of metal striking metal and the grunts of sparring Phoenixes. As Alrik suspected, Vincentius stood in the midst of the melee, about to face off with Si-Khu, one of the Egyptian Phoenixes.

“Keep the sword up higher. Not that high. Aye, like that.”

“Vincentius,” Alrik called, interrupting the Roman’s lesson.

The Centurion looked up. “Back so soon?”

“I need to speak with you. Now.” Alrik motioned toward the doors, beyond the hall.

“I suppose this will not wait until I have shown Si-Khu why Roman iron is superior to Egyptian bronze.”

“Nay. It will not.” Alrik crossed his arms, resolute.

Vincentius shook his head at Si-Khu. “Seems you have been spared. But the reprieve is temporary. Tomorrow then?”

Si-Khu nodded and went off to find another sparring partner.

The Roman fell into step beside Alrik. “What is on your mind?”

“Not here.” Alrik uncrossed his arms and glanced sideways. One of Freya’s pets, Dimitri, watched them.

Vincentius followed Alrik’s gaze. “I understand.”

Not until they were well away from everyone did Alrik speak. “I need your sword.”

“What’s wrong with yours?” Vincentius wrinkled his brow.

“It needs sharpening.”

“So sharpen it.”

“I have need of a sharp sword now.” Why were Romans so thickheaded? Could the Centurion not see this was a matter of great importance?

“For what?”

“So I may kill Freya.”

Vincentius eyes went wide. “Are you mad? You cannot kill the goddess. She is immortal. Besides, she will banish you from Valhalla.”

“I would rather be banished than spend my eternity in her service.”

“And what of your charge’s final change?”

Alrik stared past the Roman’s shoulder as his final moments with Calleigh played through his head. He closed his eyes and sighed, running his hand through his hair. The thought was painful enough. Putting it into words knotted his gut.

He glanced at Vincentius then dropped his gaze to the intricately inlaid marble floor. “She gave her last change to me.”

“What? Is that possible?” Vincentius’s mouth hung slack.

Alrik shrugged. “It must be. She commanded it and now I am here.”

“Why? What happened? I thought you told her…” Vincentius swallowed.

“I did. This was afterwards. I was searching for Calleigh when Freya appeared. She forced herself on me. Kissed me. Calleigh saw it and would not allow me to explain. And here I stand.”

Alrik exhaled gruffly. “I promise never to ask you to look after anything again.”

“I did watch her but she slipped away from me and I did not see her again after that.”

“She got away from you? Some soldier you are.” A low growl vibrated in Alrik’s throat. So much for the power of the Roman army.

Vincentius threw his hands into the air. “Would you have me follow her into the bathroom?”

Alrik sighed. “Makes no difference now. What is done is done.”

“I am sorry.” The Roman shrugged, genuine remorse in his eyes.

“Then give me your sword.” Alrik held his hand out.

“Nay. I cannot let you do this.”

“Fine.” Alrik fisted his hands on his hips. “Then I will kill her with my bare hands.”

Vincentius grabbed Alrik’s shoulder. “Listen to me. This is madness. Calleigh must have given you her change for a reason.”

“Aye. To get the vengeance she thought I wanted so badly.”

“And do you still want it?”

Alrik thought for a moment. “Aye.”

Vincentius smiled. “Then that, my friend, is exactly what you should do.”

Chapter Nineteen

As Calleigh stood in the shower rinsing off her well-earned sweat, she couldn't shake the niggling sense that she'd forgotten something.

It wasn't anyone's birthday that she could think of. Not Moreen and Corri's anniversary. Bridget's feis was still two weeks away.

"I've probably gummed up my circuits with too much sugar and cream," she announced to Snickers as she dried herself off. She ignored the fact that everything made her think of Alrik so she'd been avoiding serious thought as much as possible.

She called Seamus and made a lunch date. No point in postponing the inevitable. Sooner or later, she'd have to tell him Alrik wasn't available for any more shoots.

A little shopping in the city might be just the thing to cheer herself up, too. Worked for other women. Might as well give it a try. Her inheritance could support a spree or two. Or twelve.

Maybe she'd get a roommate and maybe she wouldn't. One thing she knew for sure. It was time to reopen the studio.

Being in that space and dancing again made her feel closer to her mother than she had in a long time. And mom would want her to keep teaching. That much she was sure of.

The day was warming up nicely. Snickers sat in front of the bedroom window while she dressed. He yowled pathetically, so she opened the window.

Whiskers twitching, his little cat nose went to work inhaling as much spring air as possible.

His curiosity made her think of Alrik and she let herself dwell on the Viking for a few moments. She missed him so much. What she wouldn't give to have him back, even for a day.

A day. She knew what she'd forgotten. The third day. Today was the third day of the change. He'd be back, wouldn't he? To make sure she still wanted him to have the last change? Wasn't that how it worked? *Oh please, oh please be right for once in your life.*

She squealed with sudden happiness. Snickers fell off the window sill, looking highly indignant.

"Sorry, Snickems!" She picked the furball up and spun around the room with him. Claws in her arm brought her to a stop.

She plopped him on the bed and grinned. "You're a very hard person to celebrate with, you know that?"

Snickers ignored her and began cleaning himself.

"I know, I know. But I'm willing to overlook him kissing that blonde hussy if he's got a good enough explanation. Besides, I hurt his feelings by not telling him I loved him back. Not to mention, that

other Phoenix kissing me. There's got to be some balance there, don't you think?"

But how would she get him to stay when he came back? He'd ask if she wanted to keep the change. If she said yes, he'd disappear again and since it was her last change, if she said no, he'd be gone too.

She looked at Snickers again. "Well, what am I going to do?"

Snickers paused mid-lick as if considering her question, then jumped back to the window sill.

"Hmmph. Where's the love? I feed you, I buy you toys you never play with, I clean out your litter box and what do you do? You ignore me. What kind of an answer is that?"

Calleigh thought for a moment. It might actually be the best answer of all.

If she ignored Alrik's question, maybe he couldn't leave. No answer, no end to his job as her Phoenix. The chance that it might work was slim but it was the only chance she had. Buoyed by the possibility, she finished dressing for lunch with her uncle.

She checked her watch. Plenty of time.

Her ability with a camera didn't begin to compare with Seamus's but she soon had a handful of decent photos of her wedding dress.

She logged on to eBay and clicked Sell. Maybe someone else would have better luck getting to the altar than she had.

Lunch patrons crowded McManus's but after the petite, redheaded hostess hugged Seamus, Calleigh didn't think they'd have to wait long.

"Come here often?" Calleigh asked.

"Occasionally." Seamus winked. "Sandy's an old friend of mine."

"Old? How long could you have known her? She's what, twenty-four?" Was there a woman in the state of New York Seamus didn't know?

"Twenty-two and that's a legal age, I'll have you know."

She held her hand up. "I really don't need to hear anymore. Not on an empty stomach anyway."

Her guess proved to be right. Sandy found them a table in minutes.

Calleigh studied her menu for something healthy. She decided on a chef salad and an iced tea. Seamus ordered a club sandwich and a Guinness. He looked at her expectantly when the waitress left.

"So, what's on your mind?"

Where to start. "I have good news, bad news and news you won't believe."

"I like multiple choice. I'll take the good news first."

"I'm reopening the studio. I'm going to teach again."

His eyes crinkled as he burst into smile. "That's wonderful news, lovey! Ah, your ma would be so happy. What made you decide that?"

“Lots of things. Life’s too short to run from the unpleasant. Keeping the studio closed isn’t going to bring Mom back. That place was her baby. I owe it to her.”

“No, love, *you* were her baby. True, she loved that studio but she’d want you to be happy first.”

“Dancing is about the only thing that has made me happy lately.”

“I don’t buy that for a minute.” He nodded his thanks as the waitress set their drinks down. “Alrik certainly puts a smile on your face.”

And she did smile. A little. “And that brings us to the bad news and the news you won’t believe.”

Seamus groaned. “Merciful Joseph. Don’t tell me you broke up with the lad again. Me poor heart can’t take it.”

She twisted the edge of the paper napkin. “We didn’t exactly break up.”

He rolled his head back and stared at the beamed ceiling. “What exactly did you do then?”

Calleigh sat silently, trying to find the words, until she felt her uncle’s dark gaze boring into her. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Well, what did you do? Kill him? Is he in jail? Do you need bail money? For the love of Pete, will you tell me already?”

She cleared her throat. “Drink your Guinness already, would you?”

“You’re stalling.” He downed a hearty portion of the brew anyway.

She leaned a little closer. “Do you know what a Phoenix is?”

“You mean the bird that rises up out of the ashes?”

“Yes, well, that’s one type of phoenix. But there’s another kind, who’s not a bird but a man. A man with wings of fire who has the power to make your life different.” She stopped, not sure how much info to give him all at once. What would he think? Would he even believe her?

Seamus set his beer down. He picked up his fork, then put it back. He took another sip of Guinness, set the glass back on the table then straightened his knife so it lay parallel to the edge of his napkin. A long silence passed between them and Calleigh’s palms started to sweat.

Finally, Seamus spoke.

“So.” He looked directly into Calleigh’s eyes. “When did you make your last change and when’s he coming back?”

* * *

Few things stirred Alrik's blood like the sight of Freya's smug face. He knew somehow she had purposely crafted the moment she kissed him so that Calleigh would see it. He felt it in his bones, like the ache before a squall.

Except this time, the storm was coming for her.

Alrik took Vincentius with him when he went to face Freya. The Roman was a good friend and if it came to it, a handy sword.

Flanked by her two great blue cats, the goddess lounged in the throne room on her golden chaise. Dimitri knelt on the floor, massaging her feet. Eros, his face unreadable, sat nearby fletching arrows with Phoenix feathers.

"Welcome, Viking. I had not expected you back so soon."

Liar. "Really? When did you expect me back?" Alrik knew the tone of his voice was less than respectful.

Dimitri looked up, smiled slyly, then refocused on his task.

Her blue eyes darkened to the shade of the sapphire brooches fastening the silks she wore. "Did your charge tire of you so quickly then? Or perhaps she had other reasons for making her last change."

Alrik ground his teeth together to keep from killing her at that moment. "What would you know about that?"

"Do not forget who you are speaking to, Viking. You seek me for a reason. I assume your charge has a change she wishes to make? Her final change perhaps?" She wriggled her toes in Dimitri's lap, causing the Phoenix to harden noticeably.

Alrik's stomach twisted. The hold she had over a Phoenix once she bedded him was sickening but Dimitri was the worst one of all. He had become little more than a pet. How Eros stayed as independent as he did was a mystery.

"Aye, my charge has decided upon her third change."

Freya placed a fingertip on her smiling lips. Her eyes lightened to the pale sparkling blue of a sunlit brook. Glee nearly bubbled out of her. Alrik could not have been happier to speak his next words.

"She commanded I use her final change."

"What?" Freya shrieked, her mouth twisted into an ugly scowl. "What? This cannot be."

"Aye. It can." Eros spoke without looking up. He continued lacing the delicate gold wire through the flight feathers of his arrows, binding them to the ivory shafts.

Freya's chest huffed out and she jumped from the chaise. Dimitri yowled as she kicked him in her haste. "I forbid it."

Eros slid a finished arrow into his golden quiver. "You cannot forbid this."

Freya stomped her foot and fisted her hands at her sides. Her great blue cats growled. "I am a goddess, I can do whatever I wish."

Eros stood and shook his head. His eyes were the same blazing blue as hers. “A charge may use her changes freely. That has always been the way of the Phoenix.”

“Get out. All of you.” Seething, she swiped her hands through the air. The throne room disappeared. Alrik and Vincentius had been transported to the courtyard.

A few Phoenixes looked up, greeting the pair with a nod before returning to their own diversions.

Vincentius threw his head back and laughed. “I have never seen the goddess in such a rage.”

Alrik grinned. Freya’s reaction was even better than he had imagined. And he had yet to tell her what his change would be.

He and Vincentius sat down to a game of Tabula. The Roman blocked Alrik and he returned the play with a defensive move.

“Viking.”

Alrik looked up into the calm blue eyes of Eros. He had not heard the demi-god approach but that was not unusual. Eros moved with an unnatural silence.

“Aye?”

“The goddess commands you come to her. It is time to make your change.”

Alrik glanced at Vincentius.

“Alone,” Eros added.

He nodded. So this was it. One way or another, in a few moments time he would no longer be a Phoenix. He reached out and clasped Vincentius’s hand. “Be well, brother.”

“And you. Go with blessings.” Vincentius’s face was solemn and Alrik knew he understood what was about to happen.

Eros led Alrik back to the throne room where Freya waited in full battle regalia, one hand on the hilt of her massive broadsword. Her eyes were so blue they were almost black. Dimitri was gone. Only her two blue cats remained.

“You have always been a great disappointment to me, Viking.” She fingered the egg-sized chunk of amber mounted in the blade’s pommel.

Because I did not succumb to your wiles? He wanted to roll his eyes but thought better of it. He was too close to getting what he had waited for these last thousand years to ruin it now. “I am sure I have been. My apologies, goddess.” Playing the submissive rubbed him raw, but in this case, the pain was worth it.

Ever so slightly, her eyes lightened. “Tell me this, Viking, how could a mortal woman woo you when I could not?”

If he did nothing else, he would protect Calleigh. “I have not been wooed by my charge, goddess.”

She smirked. “I am speaking of Dagny.”

The small hairs on the back of his neck rose. “I do not wish to speak of her.”

“But I do. Give me an explanation. Then I will hear your change.”

She wanted one more pound of flesh before she let him go. So be it. The memories would only whet his appetite for what was to come. He chose his words carefully. “As you desire, goddess. Dagny was a beautiful woman. So beautiful, I thought I had glimpsed you the first time I saw her.”

Freya settled back on her chaise, a glimmer of sky in her gaze and a slight upturn at the corner of her lips. She motioned with her hand. “Go on.”

Alrik took a deep breath. “She mesmerized me with her sweet words and adoration.”

“And this was new to you?” Freya raised a brow.

“Nay, it was not. I was used to the ways of women, to their fluttering eyes and winsome smiles. But Dagny was different.” *In more ways than I knew.*

“How so?” She plucked a grape from a bowl that had not been there moments before.

“She wanted more than just to bed me. She wanted to know me for the man I was. She listened when I spoke of my dreams—“

“What were your dreams, Viking?” Freya popped another grape and chewed. “What do mortal men dream of?”

He shut his eyes for a moment, then refocused on the floor. An ache took hold of his heart.

“Children,” he whispered.

“Speak up. I cannot hear you.”

“Children,” he answered. “A wife. A family. A life beyond being a leader of men.”

Freya curled her shoulders forward and clasped her hands, eyes skyward. “So touching. Let me guess…dear, sweet Dagny assured you these were her dreams as well?”

Anger slithered through his belly at her belittling tone. He wondered at times if Dagny and Freya were not the same woman. “Aye, she did.”

She leaned back, ate another grape, nodding slowly. He did not doubt the goddess was enjoying every moment of his misery. The cornflower blue of her eyes proved it.

“So if a woman tells you what you wish to hear, that is enough?” She tipped her head to the side.

“Nay, that was not all.”

She leaned forward with renewed interest. “Then tell me. Because I do not understand, Alrik the Iron, how you gave yourself so freely to

a woman whose true dream was to see a battle ax buried in your chest and your life's blood soiling the ground beneath her feet."

Fury rushed over him like a scorching blast of wind. The ache spiked through his chest, shattering his control.

"Because I loved her," he bellowed, chest heaving. He paused to catch his breath and rein his temper. "And she said she loved me."

Calmly, Freya sat back. "That, I understand."

He wanted to choke her.

The goddess continued. "When you first came to Valhalla, your greatest desire was vengeance for your family and your clan for what Dagny had done to them. Does this desire still exist within you, Viking?"

"Aye," he nodded, "it does."

She twisted a strand of blonde hair around one finger. "Your charge has altruistically and somewhat foolishly given you her last change. You are free to use it as you wish. Would you have your vengeance, Chieftain Gunn? Or is there some other greater matter you wish to address?"

He straightened, took a deep breath and thought of Calleigh. Did she love him? She had not spoken the words. Was not sure she could. He had only one change, one chance to regain his life.

He thought of Dagny. So many years had passed since her vicious betrayal and yet those years had not lessened the pain she had caused. One change. One chance.

The goddess strummed her fingers on the arm of her chaise. "Just because I am immortal does not mean I wish to spend a lifetime waiting on you."

Alrik exhaled a long breath. "I would have my vengeance."

Chapter Twenty

Calleigh grinned her way past the tables of granny panties and hip huggers, past the racks of everyday bras and tummy-control garments. Her destination lay in ribbons and lace, smooth silk and sheer chiffon. A delicious naughtiness warmed her belly.

Alrik would stay. She would see to that.

With an armful of satiny nothings, she headed for a dressing room. The memories of time spent in a few other dressing rooms made her smile even more than the information her uncle had shared with her.

And made her love Alrik even more.

Alrik had known her uncle would wonder about his disappearance, so he'd done the explaining himself the night of the party. What a thoughtful guy.

Her guy.

She hoped.

Calleigh was more convinced than ever that the kiss she'd witnessed had to have a logical explanation. One he'd share when he returned.

She tried on the first outfit.

Black lace looked too…naughty. She wasn't quite ready for that image yet.

Red satin was too…slutty. More like something Jeana would wear.

But the lace-trimmed lilac baby doll was perfect. It hugged her breasts and floated over her hips. Even the matching string bikini fit well. She fluffed her hair and smoothed the delicate fabric over her body. Sexy but sweet. Intriguing but innocent. Alrik couldn't possibly walk away from this.

And even if he couldn't stay, a possibility she did not want to consider, she would finally have the night she'd been dreaming of, with the man responsible for those dreams.

After a little more shopping, she made her way to the nail salon by the subway station. She chose a polish to match her purchase, a shade fittingly called "Lavender Love". The manicure relaxed her but the pedicure sent her into a fit of giggles.

The woman dropped the pumice stone and let Calleigh catch her breath. "Sensitive feet, huh?"

Calleigh tried to breath. "I guess so."

"This is your first pedicure, isn't it?"

"You can tell that from the giggling?" Calleigh was amazed.

The woman lifted Calleigh's foot by her heel and smirked. "No, by

your feet. Have you seen them? What do you do exactly?"

"Oh." Calleigh grinned. "I'm a dancer. And a dance teacher."

On her way home, she stopped at her favorite gourmet food store and bought a bottle of champagne and some chocolate-covered strawberries. All that was left was her Viking.

Once home, she unpacked her goodies and took a hot bath. She dressed in the baby doll, fixed her hair, added a smidge of makeup and a dab of perfume. Her eyes kept finding the clock. Couldn't be long now.

She placed lit candles around the living room until it was drenched in a soft, seductive glow and the inviting scent of vanilla filled the air. Nervous energy trembled through her as the minutes dragged by. The *tick, tick, tick* of the mantel clock marched across her nerves like a stream of heavy-footed ants.

Music. She needed music. Something romantic. And welcoming. She chose an André Rieu CD and turned the volume down so it played softly in the background. The gentle notes of the fiddle floated through the air, smooth ribbons of sound serenading her as she willed the time to pass quicker.

She couldn't wait to see him. Couldn't wait to kiss his delicious mouth again. Couldn't wait to inhale his unique cinnamon scent. Would she smell like cinnamon in the morning, after he'd had his way with her? Heat flushed her cheeks but didn't stop her from imaging what he would be like in bed.

"I love you," she whispered, trying the words out, tasting them in her mouth.

"I love you." Louder this time, with certainty.

Another smile. If this was being in love, she wanted to feel this way for the rest of her life.

The CD played all the way through twice. Deep puddles of molten wax surrounded the long, black wick of each candle. The mantel clock struck midnight, each successive chime more jarring than the last.

Calleigh breathed in deep sobs, tears clouding her eyes. The third day had come and gone. The ring of ashes had vanished from her floor.

Alrik was not coming back.

* * *

Snickers meowed for his breakfast and Calleigh pulled the covers over her head. Cat food just wasn't a good enough reason to get out of bed. That beast was not about to starve.

The sun glared through her windows. Birds chirped.

Stupid sun. Annoying birds.

Snickers meowed again.

"Fine! I'm up. Quit torturing me. You're not gonna die if you miss a meal."

Pale purple silk bunched around her waist. The imprinted pattern of lace covered one arm where she'd slept with it beneath her. She wrenched the lilac fluff over her head and threw it in the corner. No one actually wore that crap to bed in real life, did they?

She pulled on a T-shirt and some sweatpants and headed for the kitchen. Snickers bounded along, crying and checking over his shoulder to be sure she was still moving.

"Seriously, you need to calm down. You're way too hyper for a cat with your weight issues."

She fed him, then opened the fridge to get a diet Pepsi for herself. The box of chocolate-covered strawberries sat on the shelf. She grabbed those too.

Pushing aside a candle, she hunkered down at the breakfast bar. The pop of the soda can triggered her need for caffeine and she downed a large gulp. Carbonation burned the back of her throat.

She stuffed a strawberry in her mouth and chewed, staring into space. Juice trickled down her chin and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. Another strawberry. And another.

She was six berries through the dozen when the phone rang.

The machine picked up. Seamus's voice greeted her after the message.

"Calleigh love, pick up. It's very important."

"No," she answered, even though he couldn't hear her.

"I know yer there. Pick up. Pick up or I'm coming over and I'm bringing Moreen and Corri with me."

She grabbed the receiver. "Do it and I'll throw your favorite camera off the Brooklyn Bridge."

"Is that a nice way to greet yer favorite uncle on a gorgeous spring morning such as this?"

"What's gorgeous about it?" She bit into another strawberry.

"I take it our lad didn't show?"

She swallowed. "Bingo."

"Well, bless yer poor wee heart but yer not going to sit around and mope the day away."

"Actually, I am and you can't stop me." Why had she answered the phone? Seamus could be such a butthead sometimes.

"I can and I will. Now get yerself showered and prettied up and come meet me at the studio. We'll go for brunch at Meridian."

"No."

"Yes."

"You've just become my least favorite uncle."

"I can live with that. Now, let's go. You need to eat."

"I've already had breakfast."

"Ice cream doesn't count."

"It wasn't ice cream." Hah! So there.

Seamus waited a beat. "Well?"

"Chocolate-covered strawberries," she mumbled, hoping it sounded like more like honey bunches of bran flakes.

"Och! Get off your arse, get dressed and get out of that house or I'm coming to get you," he huffed. "I'll see you in an hour. And wear something nice!" He hung up.

She growled into the phone before smacking the receiver back into place. Men! So bossy and bothersome and male. She stomped to the bathroom and threw her clothes on the floor. Regardless of what her uncle thought, this little outing of his was not going to make her feel better.

Men! They always acted like they ran the world.

She scrubbed and rinsed and slammed the shower door when she got out. She left the wet towel on the floor next to her clothes just because she could.

Wear something nice. What was that supposed to mean? Did he think she was going to show up in a burlap sack and waders?

She picked through her closet. Ugly. Old. Ugly. Wrong color. Too short. Too tight. Gift from Brad.

She threw that sweater in the trash.

He wanted nice? Fine, she'd give him nice. Nice and simple. She pulled out a short plum-colored knit dress. It was one of her favorites, actually. The scoop neckline flattered her shoulders and she'd always thought they were one of her better features.

Maybe some guy would flirt with her so she could blow him off for the fun of it. She rolled her eyes at her own foolishness.

Nice panties, matching bra. This was stupid. No one was going to see them. But she put them on anyway, to make herself feel better. At least if she got into an accident, she wouldn't be embarrassed. Yeah, like she wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen in her underwear just because they matched?

She fixed her makeup and dried her hair, leaving it curly. She checked the clock. Half an hour left. Time to hit the door.

The sun shone down on her like it had a personal mission. She fished out her sunglasses. Spring was overrated. Way too cheery.

Her ballet flats slapped the sidewalk. She liked the sound. It was slightly annoying.

Plenty of seats on the subway. She stared at an ad for Jennifer Convertibles. Maybe she should get a leather couch. Snickers would

probably shred it.

She changed trains and found a seat on the new one. She was still pondering the idea of leather when she saw Alrik's ad.

Her throat lumped up. That couldn't be out already, could it? They'd erased his scars with airbrushing or some other high tech computer software but it was still him.

His eyes looked right back at her. Icy blue and beautiful. She turned her head, glad she had no tears left to cry. That ad would be plastered across the city for months. This wasn't going to be easy.

The scent of cinnamon wafted through the air. Could it be? She looked in the other direction. The man two seats down took another bite of his sticky bun.

He had to eat that now? On this subway? She wrinkled her nose and moved to the next bench to wait for her stop.

When the elevator doors opened to her uncle's studio, she smelled cinnamon for the second time.

"Hi, Calleigh!" Leona shouted.

"I'm right here, no need to yell."

"Sorry, I've got a cold. I'm all stuffed up and I can barely hear a thing." She sipped something hot from a mug.

Calleigh pointed. "What is that?"

"Tea. Want some?"

"No. What kind of tea?"

Leona studied the tag. "Orange Spice. It's pretty good, sure you don't want some."

Well, that explained the cinnamon. "No, thanks. Is Seamus around?"

"Sure. Just a sec."

Leona turned in her chair, leaned toward the dark room and yelled. "Seamus!"

He opened the door and peered out. "Leona, for the love of Mary, use the blessed intercom, will you?"

"Sure thing, boss. Calleigh's here."

"So I see. Be right with you, lovey. Have a seat at my desk, I'll be right in. You want a cup of tea? It's lovely." He lifted a mug and grinned.

Who put a quarter in him this morning? "No. Thanks. I'm not even hungry. I'm only here because you threatened me."

"Be with you in a jiff then." He winked and shut the door.

She rolled her eyes but headed for his desk. She plopped down and grabbed a magazine.

Every page was the same. Skinny, leggy twits in extraordinarily expensive clothes looking bored. What a racket. She scanned Seamus's desk for the appropriate tool and found it near a stack of eight by

ten's. She popped the cap off. The pungent smell of the permanent marker quickly overpowered the lingering scent of cinnamon.

The haughty Versace redhead got a goatee. The too-thin brunette in Ferragamo sported an afro. But Calleigh saved the best for last. The frigid blonde bedecked in Chanel pearls now wore a Fu Manchu. She held the magazine out to admire her handiwork. Amazing how a little constructive vandalism perked a girl right up.

"Having fun?"

"Yes, actually—" The air vanished from her lungs. A chill swept through her. Her hands trembled and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

That voice.

She willed herself to turn and look.

Alrik.

Chapter Twenty-one

Seamus grinned over Alrik's left shoulder. "See how things work out when you listen to yer uncle?"

She was on the verge of hyperventilating but she couldn't help it. "What are you…I thought you were…you didn't show up and I…what about your family…what happened to your head?"

Alrik wore a small gash on his forehead, just above his right eyebrow.

Seamus stepped forward. "Look, why don't you two go sit on the couch and have a nice chat? Leona and I have some locations to check out."

He kissed Calleigh on the cheek before whispering in her ear, "Follow your heart, love."

She nodded without taking her eyes off her Viking.

Grinning like Notre Dame had just whooped Navy, Seamus clapped Alrik on the back. "And you, you listen up. That's my niece. You step out of line and I'll show ye the true meaning of the Fightin' Irish, understand?"

Alrik nodded without taking his eyes off Calleigh.

Seamus chuckled and headed toward Leona's desk.

When the elevator doors had closed, Alrik held his hands out.

Calleigh had never seen his eyes so blue or his face so serious. She slipped her hands into his. The warmth of his skin gave her goose bumps.

"Are you real?" she whispered. Her eyes burned with tears.

"Aye." His voice cracked. "I am."

He blinked hard. "I need to know. Do you—"

"Yes!" she interrupted, nodding her head. "Yes, I do. I love you. I'm sorry I didn't say it to you sooner."

A smile that lit the room broke out across his face. "I love you, too."

He bent and caught her beneath the knees with one arm and behind her back with the other.

She shrieked as he hoisted her into his arms and kissed her.

She flattened her palms against his chest and broke the kiss. "I saw you kiss that blonde hussy."

He grinned. "Nay, what you saw was Freya kiss me. What you missed was the moment after when I pushed her away. I did not want that kiss, Calleigh lass. Since I met you, I have thought of none other but you."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I want your kisses and yours alone."

He hadn't cheated on her. Her eyes widened. "That was a real live goddess?"

He nodded, amusement sparkling in his eyes. "Aye."

"I don't care if she is a goddess, I don't like her."

He struggled to suppress a grin. "I think she feels the same about you."

"But she is beautiful." *And a freakin' goddess.*

He shrugged. "But not the most beautiful."

"There are other goddesses more beautiful than her?"

His brows rose as in thought. "Aye, there are."

"Such as?" she demanded.

"Such as the goddess I hold in my arms." He kissed the corner of her trembling mouth. "Will you have me, Calleigh lass? I am no longer a Phoenix. I have no means, no land, nothing to offer you but love."

She laughed. "Do you have any idea how much you're getting paid for the ad you did?"

He shook his head.

"Trust me," she said. "You have means. And if Seamus has anything to do with it, you'll have more means than you can handle."

She winked. "Besides, I'm loaded."

"Then you will have me?" His face brightened.

"Aye." She grinned. "I will have you." *All of you, and soon.*

She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. He no longer tasted of cinnamon. But his lips were still as soft, his passion still as hot.

He teased her mouth open, gentling his tongue across hers.

Stars glittered behind her lids. The heat of his kiss traveled to her core and radiated through her like a secret sun.

A deep, abiding happiness settled over her. Alrik was hers. *Hers*. He'd come back after all.

With a sigh of satisfaction, she opened her eyes and looked at the man she couldn't imagine living without. "I missed you. I was so sure you'd be back on the third day. What happened?"

Before he could answer, she touched the gash on his forehead. "And you still haven't explained this."

"Well, my love, let us settle in on the couch as your uncle suggested and I will regale you with the saga of my last days in the service of the goddess of love."

Chapter Twenty-two

Alrik loved the feel of Calleigh in his lap. From the lush softness of her backside pressed against him to her delicious scent that filled his nose, he reveled in every beautiful bit of her.

This woman, this amazing woman, loved him. It was a feeling that set a man's heart free.

He leaned back on the couch and she wiggled to get comfy. The movement roused an earthy heat in his loins. He grinned and nuzzled her neck.

Her squeals told him he had kissed the right spot.

She bent her head away. "Stop that! You're supposed to be telling me what happened."

"Well then, stop your wiggling. It does things to me."

She raised her brows. "Things? Like what?"

He rolled his eyes. "I am sure you do not know."

She laughed. "Okay, I'll stop wiggling if you stop kissing me. But just until the story is over. Then the kissing can start again. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Thor's hammer, she bewitched him. He kissed her once more, just to hear her squeal again.

"Alrik!"

He laughed. "You do know I no longer require your permission to kiss you? Or anything else for that matter."

"So I noticed." A light blush colored her cheeks.

"On to the story." His face ached from smiling. He pulled her closer and she rested her head on his shoulder. The pleasure from her small acts of affection staggered him. He inhaled and found the breath to begin. "When you gave me your last change, I did not at first comprehend what it might mean. I simply understood that you had seen Freya kiss me and having misunderstood it, wanted to be rid of me."

He cupped her chin and lifted her face to his. "I will never betray you. Ever. You must know that."

"I do."

"Good." He released her and kissed the top of her head as she settled back against him. "I was furious with Freya for what she had done, but most of all, for hurting you. I decided to kill her."

Calleigh jumped in his arms. "What? That doesn't sound like a good idea."

"Vincentius did not think so either. He talked me out of it and gave me a new plan."

"He's not so bad for a Roman."

Alrik laughed out loud. "He will be pleased to know you think so

highly of him."

"You talk like you're going to see him again."

He nodded. "I will, as will you."

"Really? When? How come?"

Shaking his head, he smiled. "I will answer those questions in due time."

"Okay but I'm holding you to that." She tapped her finger on his chest.

"Good enough. Now back to the story. Vincentius also went with me when I faced Freya to tell her what your change had been." He thought about that for a moment. "I think he worried I might still try to kill her."

"Could you have actually killed her? I mean, she is a goddess," Calleigh said.

"Nay, I could not have killed her, but I would have taken pleasure from trying."

"What would she have done to you for that?" Her voice was soft, almost a whisper.

"She would have banished me from Valhalla."

Calleigh shuddered in his arms. "That doesn't sound like a good thing."

He lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips. "I am here now, that is all that matters."

She nodded against his chest. "So how *did* you get here?"

"Ah, the story. When I told Freya you had given me your last change, she exploded. I swear to you, in my countless years in her service, never have I seen her so overcome by rage. She lost control."

"Freaked her out, huh?"

He smiled, remembering the goddess's outburst. "It was a highly enjoyable thing to watch. For that, I thank you."

"You're welcome." She patted his chest. "Why did it make her so mad? It was my change to give."

"Aye, that is was. It angered her because she realized the change would take me from her service. She was about to lose her control of me, and she knew it."

"I hate that she has the hots for you." Calleigh's words came out tinged with jealousy. "How many times did she try to hook up with you?."

He nodded slowly, thinking about all the times Freya had tried to seduce him into her bed. "If you mean how many times did she try to bed me, many."

"Why didn't you?" She pulled back and looked at him. "I mean, I'm really glad you didn't but I can't believe you resisted her for that many years."

“The pleasure comes with too high price. Once she beds you, she owns you. All chance of leaving her service vanishes. I wanted revenge more than I wanted her. And the thought of being turned into her pet, like Dimitri…” He curled his lip in disgust.

Her eyes widened. “Did you just say Dimitri? Blond hair?” She circled her fingers in front of her face. “Crazy blue eyes?”

“Aye. The eyes of those who become her thralls take on the same shifting blue of the goddess.” He furrowed his brow. “How do you know this?”

“I…I ran into Dimitri at the club. Vincentius was taking his guard dog role a little too seriously so I told him I had to go to the bathroom and slipped away. Dimitri seemed nice enough at first, but as we danced he kept getting closer and…” She hung her head.

Temper flared hot in his veins. He sensed what was coming next. “Go on.”

“I didn’t want to stay but I couldn’t seem to get away from him.” Her head stayed down, and her voiced lowered further. “He kept telling me I wanted it. He kissed me. Without permission, I swear.”

He growled and clenched his fist. “Freya used him to distract you until the moment was right.”

She looked up, eyes glistening. “I knew something wasn’t kosher when he kissed me. You told me a Phoenix wasn’t allowed to interfere. That was definitely interfering. I managed to break away from him and that’s when I went to look for you.”

He brushed his thumb across her cheek. “Like all of Freya’s minions, Dimitri’s gaze holds hypnotic power. It only works on mortals. I am so sorry. I did not know this happened to you.” He hugged her close, the soft press of her body soothing his anger. “Could I regain entrance to Valhalla, I would hunt that cur down and geld him.”

She laughed softly. “I don’t think Freya would like that.”

“All the more reason.” He kissed her sweet, pouting lips.

She kissed him back but only for a moment. “So what happened next? After Freya freaked out?”

He pulled her tight, snugging her hip against his groin. “When Freya regained control, she realized she had to grant my change. The laws of the Phoenix are not hers to bend. I announced my change and it was made so. And here I am.”

“You think that’s going to satisfy me? *I announced my change and it was made so*.” She deepened her voice, imitating him. “I want the whole story. What about avenging your family and getting even with Dagny?”

He leaned further back on the couch and propped one arm behind his head. “I have Vincentius to thank for helping me figure this out as

well. For my change, I requested that my soul be taken by Freya two days prior to my marriage with Dagny and that my life be regained here, with you. My disappearance will be a hard thing for my family to take but better that they live and miss me, than we all die for naught.

"Besides, my brother long held suspicions of Dagny. I think my disappearance will raise his guard high enough to prevent her deception. And with no wedding feast, her plans must be relaid."

An image of his brother flashed in his mind. "Aran is a good man. He will be a fine chieftain in my stead. I wish you could have met my brother. He would like you very much."

Calleigh tilted her head. "But won't you miss your family?"

"I have mourned my family for more years than I can count. Knowing I was not the cause of their needless deaths has lightened my heart considerably. It will not be such a hard thing to bear, I think."

"Wait." Her brows knit in confusion. "Let me get this straight. You asked Freya to bring you back here, to me. But you didn't show up on the third day like I thought you would."

He grimaced. "Actually, I did return on the third evening. To a place called Central Park. Freya's last strike, I suppose."

She bit her bottom lip. "Does that have anything to do with the cut on your forehead?"

"Aye. This Central Park is not such a friendly place when the sun sets. But trust me when I tell you the other four are far worse off."

"Four?" She swallowed. "I don't think I want to know any more about that."

He chuckled. "I promise not to speak another word of it."

"Thanks. How did you get from Central Park to here?"

"I did not know how to find you but I had your uncle's card still in my pocket. I procured one of those yellow vehicles, showed him the card and commanded he take me there."

"Wow." The corner of her mouth turned up in a playful grin. "You're smarter than a horse."

He laughed. "I am just pleased your uncle agreed to pay the driver."

She wiggled off his lap to kneel beside him on the couch. Her bronze eyes were so serious, so full of wonder. "You really took a chance coming back here, didn't you?"

"Aye." He clasped his hands around her waist, enjoying the feel of his woman. "I did not know if you loved me or if you would even want to speak to me but my heart would not let me decide otherwise. I had to come back to you."

She flung her arms around him and squeezed. "I'm so glad you did." Her breath tickled his ear as she exhaled. "I'm so glad you did."

Chapter Twenty-three

Vincentius grinned, despite the foolishness of what Alrik was about to do. There was no talking the headstrong Viking out of it anyway. And part of the Roman enjoyed seeing this great chieftain as nervous as a gladiator awaiting his fate in the arena.

The late-spring sun warmed the morning considerably. It would be a good day and for that Vincentius was glad. The man beside him deserved this day to be good. He had waited long enough and known too much hurt.

Strains of a fiddle drifted through the rose-scented air. The Roman took his eyes off his friend and turned. For a moment, he imagined he saw a goddess, but he knew better. The woman in white smiling at his friend was far more beautiful and far more kind.

Calleigh stood at the head of the aisle, each arm looped through one of her uncles' arms. She glanced heavenward, hoping her parents could see how happy she was.

Her aunt and uncle's backyard looked like a rose explosion. It was breathtaking. But not as breathtaking as the man waiting for her in front of the bloom-covered arbor.

She took her first step down the petal-strewn aisle as the small assembly of guests stood, but Alrik was the only person she saw. That he had worn a tux for her almost made her weep. Almost. She refused to ruin her fabulous makeup before the rest of the pictures had been taken.

The glint of moisture in his eyes belied the serious set of his jaw. She guessed she was not the only one struggling to hold back tears.

Heavens above, she loved this man. All the hustle and bustle of planning the small ceremony disappeared and the moment she'd been focused on these last two months was finally here.

Seamus and Corri took their turns kissing her cheeks before Corri placed her hand in Alrik's. The strength of his grip eased her nerves. She wondered if he could feel her shaking.

He smiled hesitantly, his voice a whisper. "You look beautiful."

"So do you," she answered back. And he did. Viking or not, he looked born for black and white. She couldn't wait to give him his gift. She hoped he would be impressed with her research.

"I love you," she added.

His smile grew a little brighter. They turned together and faced the priest.

"Dearly beloved, we gather here today in the sight of God, and before all of you, to join together this man and this woman in holy

matrimony." He lead them through their vows then nodded at Calleigh that is was time.

She tried to contain her grin but the secret she'd planned was just too good. She bent to retrieve what she'd earlier hidden behind the massive arbor of roses.

She slid the intricately carved sword from its sheath and swung the rune-etched blade up over her head to present it to Alrik.

At the flash of sun on metal, his eyes went wide. He swore under his breath in a language she didn't understand and fisted his hands.

Vincentius grabbed Alrik's arm. "She is trying to gift you the sword, not slay you with it."

Calleigh nodded frantically at her husband-to-be. "It's a gift, that's all, I swear."

Relaxing his hands, Alrik took a deep breath. He eyed the sword, met Calleigh's gaze, then stared at the sword again.

"It's traditional, isn't it? The exchange of swords? I just wanted to give you something to make you feel…at home." She waited, watching his expression. Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea.

"You purchased this blade for me?"

"Yes. I read about Vik—" she caught herself, "—Norse wedding customs online and I just wanted to do something special for you."

A small grin broke across his face and he took the sword from her, testing the weight in his hands. "This is a fine sword."

"Look here," she pointed, "on the blade. I had it engraved. I hope it's right."

"*Ast og trygd eilift*." He paused, the smile softening with emotion.

"Love and loyalty forever," he translated. He stared at the sword, shaking his head as though he didn't believe what he was seeing.

"I have no words for how this makes me feel." His smile faded entirely. "And I have no sword for you."

She shrugged. "I'm good. Really. It's harder to dance with a sword strapped to you than you'd think."

She handed him the scabbard and he tucked the blade away before handing it to Vincentius.

"You are an amazing woman, Calleigh McCarthy," Alrik said.

He looked at the priest. "How much longer before this woman is my wife?"

The priest smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "Patience, my son. You're only moments away from wedded bliss, but your eagerness is certainly appreciated."

A few muffled laughs sounded from the gathered crowd.

"Do you have the rings?" the priest asked.

Calleigh turned to Bridget as Vincentius handed something to Alrik. They held the rings out in unison.

The priest nodded. “These unbroken circles are a symbol of your love with no beginning or end. With the exchange of these rings, you both give and receive this love freely and equally. May these rings serve as a lifelong symbol and reminder of the wedding vows taken and the promises therein. You may exchange your rings.”

Utter joy filled Calleigh as Alrik slid the shining band of gold over her finger. Her hands shook as she placed his on his hand. Married. They were well and truly married.

The priest’s smile never wavered. “By the authority of God and the state of New York, I pronounce you husband and wife. Son, you may now kiss your bride.”

Alrik threaded his hands into her curls and kissed her long and hard. The crowd whooped and shouts of *Sláinte* rang out. An Irish fiddle started a lively jig as they began their way down the aisle as man and wife.

The small crowd clapped and rang small brass bells. They followed Alrik and Calleigh to the reception area set up on the brick patio.

Moreen made it to Calleigh first. With tears in her eyes, she hugged her niece. “If yer mother was here she’d tell you how beautiful you look. I’m so happy for you, lass. You deserve this.”

“Thanks, Aunt Moreen.” Calleigh wanted to say more but her voice cracked. Moreen nodded in understanding and patted her cheek.

“Don’t make the lass cry, Moreen. Seamus is waitin’ on them to finish their pictures.” Corri’s eyes looked suspiciously moist. He took a turn hugging Calleigh, then clapped Alrik hard-on the shoulder. “Welcome to the family, lad.”

Alrik bowed his head slightly and nodded his thanks, never once letting go of Calleigh’s hand.

Corri faced the guests assembled in his yard. “After these two get their photos done, we’ll have a blessing and eat some of this wonderful food you all helped to prepare. And don’t hesitate to drink up. Seamus is footin’ the bar bill.” The crowd laughed and Corrigan looked as proud as if Calleigh were his own daughter.

Several rolls of film later, Calleigh and Alrik stood beneath one of the large oaks getting ready for their final shot.

“We’re married,” she whispered in his ear.

He laughed. “I know. I was right beside you.”

“I can’t help it. I want to tell everyone.”

“I am certain everyone here is aware we are married.” He kissed her nose. “But you may announce it as much as you like if it keeps a smile on that beautiful mouth.”

She leaned over, unable to control herself. “Ask me what my name is.”

Alrik's brows knit together. "Why would I do that? I know what your name is."

She punched him lightly in the arm. "Ask me!"

"Is that an order?"

She punched him again, this time a little harder.

"I should have known the abuse would start once the ring was on your finger." He laughed and rolled his eyes. "What is your name, fair eyes?"

A wicked grin curved her lips. "Mrs. Alrik Gunn, pleased to meet you."

"I swear, Mrs. Gunn, you may be the silliest woman I have ever known." He grabbed her around the waist and kissed her again.

With Badu at his elbow, Seamus popped up over his camera. "Any time today you two want to finish this is fine with me. It's not like I have Guinness to drink or anything."

Badu nudged him. "Leave them be. That is what love does to a person."

Seamus grinned. "I'll show you what else love does to a person when we get home."

Badu laughed as Vincentius rushed up, a serious look on his face.

Alrik glanced to his friend. "Is something wrong?"

The Roman shook his head but kept his voice low when he spoke. "Sorry to interrupt but I have to go."

He clasped Alrik's wrist. "Blessings to both of you. Be well, brother."

"Aye, brother, and you as well." Alrik clasped the Roman's wrist in farewell.

Calleigh laid her hand atop both of theirs and shook her head. "You can't go yet. The party's barely begun. Besides, I think my friend Erika likes you."

Flames glittered in Vincentius' eyes. "I have no choice. My talisman has just been found."

Epilogue

"Would you like a glass of champagne, orange juice or a mimosa before we take off?" The flight attendant smiled as she held out a tray of glasses.

"Orange juice would be great, thanks." Calleigh helped herself and Alrik did the same.

The flight attendant moved on to the next row of first class passengers. Calleigh set her juice down on the wide armrest between her and her Viking.

She squeezed his arm. "Can you believe it? A honeymoon in Japan. We're going to have so much fun. I think you'll like Japan. They're really into swords over there."

Alrik set his juice down beside hers and smiled wickedly. "I believe I will be too busy with *other* things to spend much time thinking about swords."

Seamus looked over the seat in front of them. "I'd like to remind you that the first half of this trip is about work, not pleasure. We have a campaign to shoot."

From the seat next to him, Badu patted his arm. "And I would like to remind you that the last half of this trip will have *nothing* to do with work. Now leave the lovebirds to coo over one another and tell me again why I agreed to come with you?"

"Because you can't get enough of me? Or is it because I'm irresistible? Or maybe it's my charming good looks?" Seamus blew her a kiss and sat down.

Alrik groaned under his breath and leaned closer to Calleigh. "I lied. I am thinking about swords very much right now."

She slid her hand up his arm to cup his face in her palm. She drew him closer and nibbled on his bottom lip before giving him her best naughty smile. "I'll just have to give you something else to think about then, won't I?"

About Kristen Painter

Kristen Painter resides on the Spacecoast of Florida with her retired Air Force hubby and three feline dependents. Her writing has explored many genres—poetry, non-fiction, short stories, and now fun paranormals, quirky young adult or dark & twisty urban fantasy. Her work has been seen in Sun magazine, Cosmopolitan, and the Romance Writers Report. A two-time Golden Heart finalist, she's also the co-founder of the award winning site, Romance Divas, and the past vice president and webmaster of two RWA chapters, Chesapeake Romance Writers (CRW) and SpacecoasT Authors of Romance (STAR) and the current President of ESPAN. She's represented by The Knight Agency.